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Tatsuki Fujimoto

Novel by

Sakaku Hishikawa

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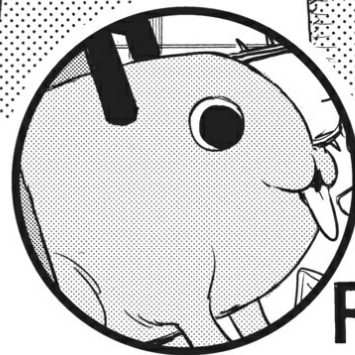
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[ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#)

CHARACTERS

Denji

A young man-slash-Chainsaw Devil who carries his partner Pochita inside him. He's always true to his desires. Likes Makima, the first person to ever treat him like a human being.



Pochita

Chainsaw Devil. Gave up his heart to Denji, becoming part of his body.

Makima



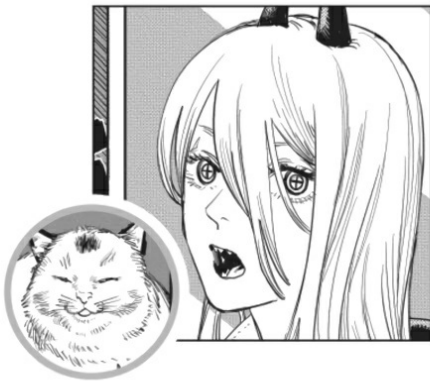
The mysterious woman in charge of Public Safety Devil Extermination Special Division 4. Knows devils by their scent.

Aki



Makima's loyal subordinate and Denji's senior in Public Safety by three years. Finds himself essentially babysitting Denji.

Power



Blood Devil Fiend. Egotistical and prone to being out of control. Her cat Meowy is her only friend.

Himeno



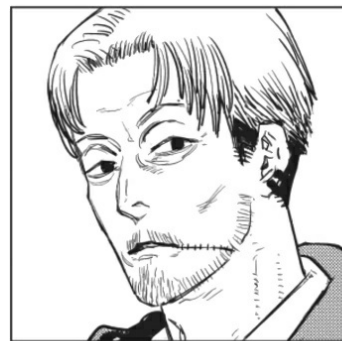
Aki's work senior and partner. Contracted with the Ghost Devil.

Quanxi



An assassin from China who's after Denji. Used to be Kishibe's partner and supposedly the strongest humanity has to offer.

Kishibe



A man with extraordinary fighting ability in the Special Division. The strongest devil hunter. Denji and Power's instructor.

STORY

Denji was a small-time devil hunter just trying to survive in a harsh world. After being killed on a job, he is revived by his pet devil Pochita and becomes something new and dangerous—Chainsaw Man!

After Denji buzzes through all his attackers, he's taken in by the mysterious Makima, and begins a new life as a Public Safety Devil Hunter.

Makima assigns him to the team led by her subordinate, Aki Hayakawa, and partners him with the Blood Devil Fiend, Power. Denji and Power live at Aki's house and spend their days hunting devils.

Denji's instructor, Kishibe, puts him through hell, calling it "training," and Denji finds himself fighting all kinds of devils, fiends, and even other devil hunters. Brutal violence claims the lives of his friends one after another.

Finally, Denji confronts the Gun Devil—killer of Aki's family, whereabouts heretofore unknown—but even that showdown turns out to be part of another, grander scheme...

the 'information' and 'communication' fields. The 'information' field is defined as:

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THE GREAT DETECTIVE POWER AND HER ASSISTANT DENJI

*E*ight individuals gathered in the dilapidated theater long after closing time. They sat in the front row, glancing around and shifting uncomfortably.

A spotlight erupted from the stage, blinding them.

“I see you all accepted my invitation. Excellent. Thank you so much for coming,” said a man in a tuxedo and silk top hat. His voice reverberated through the theater and he seemed to float in the light. He flashed the befuddled spectators a smile. “We’ve got a very special show for you tonight. One we think you’ll enjoy right to the bitter end. Assistant—the picture, if you would!”

“I’m on it!” called a young man in baggy shorts from the back of the theater. As images began to flicker across the screen, the man onstage gestured broadly.

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the film Sole Survivor, as all of you were in the cast. It’s an ensemble piece in which masked characters vanish, one by one. But alas, one person went beyond acting and disappeared for real. The film became a mystery, if you will, a missing persons case. One even I struggled to solve.” The man paused to pull a magnifying glass from his pocket. “It was a riddle. An enigma. Yes, this stage is thick with the heady scent of mystery! But there’s a turn to every trick, a sleight to every hand. Observation, my friends. Observation is the door to the truth.”

The man whirled to capture the audience in his magnifying glass. “The fiendish creator of that puzzle is among us tonight!” His lips curled at the hubbub this set off in the audience. He produced a rope tied into a large knot. “I’ve undone the

knot of the mystery.” He tugged gently on either side of the rope, drawing it apart until the knot unraveled.

Someone gasped. The man onstage tossed the rope overhead, where it transformed into a cane. He caught the cane effortlessly and twirled it to and fro. It stopped abruptly, pointing into the audience. “You. You are the culprit.”

“Hey.”

No response.

“Hey, Power.”

Still no response.

“Power! I’m talking to you!”

Power was glued to the television—from where she was sitting, she could have taken a bite out of it—and oblivious to the boy roughly shaking her by the shoulders. At last she turned to look at the scruffy blond street punk scowling down at her. She scowled right back and tossed her head, brandishing her blood-red horns. “What do you want, Denji? They just got to the good part, and I’ll thank you to stay out of the way.”

“You’re the one who needs to get out of the way, Power. You’re blocking the signal from the remote! Move back so I can change the channel!” Denji grumbled.

“I won’t allow it.” Power turned back to the TV, but it was harder to ignore the hands shaking her.

“I said move!” Denji continued shaking her. “I’ve got things to watch too, you know!”

“You?” scoffed Power. “What would *you* watch?”

“The news,” Denji said.

“The news?” Power burst out laughing. “Why, because you resemble a police sketch? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Cram it,” Denji said sheepishly. “The one anchor chick is hot.”

“Ah, yes, you’ve mentioned her.” Power knew an angle when she found one.

“The one who looks a bit like Makima, right? Well, that’s just stupid. I don’t wish to be part of anything stupid.”

Power’s brutal honesty was too much for Denji. He shot back, “Okay, what’s the supposedly great thing *you’re* watching?”

“How ignorant can you be? That’s Detective Magician!”

“Detective Magician?”

“Correct.” Power beamed. “He’s a brilliant sleuth who can solve any mystery.”

Solved! Detective Magician—Secret Tricks and Just Plain Secrets was a prime-time anime about an unassuming teenager who moonlighted as both a flamboyant stage magician and a detective who tackled cases of every kind. He didn’t like solving mysteries so much as he liked being the center of attention. He adored the admiring gazes and showers of applause he got every time a case closed.

Attention. Applause. Admiration. Power could identify with wanting those things.

The Blood Fiend rose, studying the room intently. “Aha! The criminal is *here!*” she announced, pointing at Meowy.

“Here?” Denji said, following Power’s accusatory digit right through Meowy to himself.

“I’ve undone the knot of this mystery. The culprit is *you*, Denji!”

“Me? What’d I do wrong?”

“A fine question.”

“You don’t know what you’re accusing me of?”

“Ah! I just now remembered. You,” Power declared, “are the foul criminal who ate all the ice cream out of the freezer!”

“*You* ate it yesterday.”

“What’s that? I ate no ice cream.”

Denji backed away. “This is getting weird ...” Then he started laughing and clutching his stomach. “You had me going there, dumbass! *Detective Magician!*”

That's a cartoon for kids!"

"How dare you mock Detective Magician? Show some respect!" Power sprang at Denji, who instinctively struck back. The two of them were alike in impulsiveness if nothing else. An unfortunate curtain, caught in the melee, was torn off its rod, and jars of spices toppled from the counter. Denji and Power tumbled back against the dinner table, still struggling.

"Keep it down! I'm on the phone!" A man leaned in from the next room, covering a receiver with his hand.

"Says the biggest mouth in this place," Denji snapped.

"Let this be a lesson to you, Topknot," said Power. "Silence is golden." She and Denji kept their grips on one another's lapels.

Aki hung up the phone and confronted them with a stormy look. Arms crossed and stance wide, he commanded, "Don't talk back. This is my house. Sit down right where you are, and I don't want to hear another peep out of either of you."

Denji and Power glanced at each other. Without enthusiasm, they plopped down and crossed their legs. "Yes, sir."

"Topknot is making an awful fuss," Power muttered.

"First off, no fighting in the house," said Aki. "Second, address me with respect. How long will it take you to learn manners?"

"Bleh," said Denji. "Why the hell should we respect you? What do we get out of it?"

"You'll have to advance a couple of pay grades before you earn respect!" Power added.

Aki spared a rueful glance for the spices on the floor, then muttered, "So that's how it is. Okay, Denji, no dinner for you."

"Hey! What the hell, dude?"

Power chortled. "That's what you get for mocking the great Detective Magician!"

“And Power, for your dinner, it’s carrot and burdock root salad.”

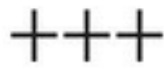
“Huh?”

An empty stomach was Denji’s mortal enemy—and vegetables were Power’s. The owner of the house was well aware of his charges’ weaknesses.

“Oh, Hayakawa! Respected senior hunter,” Denji mewled.

“Respected senior hunter!” Power added. Both troublemakers shifted to kneel politely with their feet tucked in.

Aki gave a profound sigh. “Get on over to Public Safety. Miss Makima is asking for you.”



Devils, creatures born from fear, existed to terrorize humans. Public Safety’s role was to exterminate them, and the epicenter of anti-devil activity was the Public Safety Devil Extermination Special Division, where Power and Denji worked.

The red-tinted sunlight slanting through the office windows did nothing to dispel the tension that suffused the department. A woman with elegant features sat framed in the light.

“It’s been ten days since you moved in with Hayakawa, my dear Power,” she said. “How are the three of you getting along?” Her tone was casual, yet her voice pierced to the heart.

Denji’s and Power’s superior, Makima, reported directly to the Chief Cabinet Secretary. She wielded an inexhaustible air of authority, had eyes that seemed to pin anything caught in her gaze, and exuded a strange chill that froze one to the bone. In spite of herself, Power always tensed up in Makima’s presence.

“We’re, uh, great. Yup. Getting along swimmingly.” Power nodded ferociously, avoiding Makima’s eyes.

Beside her, Denji pointed gleefully. “Ms. Makima, wait till you hear this! She doesn’t bathe! Like, ever!”

“You liar! I’ve been bathing every three days, on the dot!” Power spat back.

“And she never flushes her poop!”

“I do! About half the time ...”

“It oughta be *all* the time!”

“May I get a word in?” Makima purred. Power reflexively sat straightened up. “We have a devil hunting request, and I thought I might send you two.”

“Oh ...” Power stammered. “I, uh, have ... an urgent meeting that day!”

“You’ll notice I haven’t provided a date or details yet, Power,” Makima said with a faint smile. She slid some papers out of a large manila envelope. “The request comes from an entrepreneur in the hospitality industry. He has an isolated property up in the mountains, and it seems people have disappeared from it.”

“People ... disappearing ...” Power whispered to herself.

Denji raised his hand. “And you think a devil did it?”

“Exactly. At least, there’s a strong chance. We don’t have any clear descriptions, though, so it’s still something of a mystery.”

“A mystery ...” Power’s mouth twitched.

Makima leaned her elbows on the table and gave them a pointed look. “I know I’ve mentioned more than once that Public Safety’s Devil Extermination Special Division 4 is an experimental unit. The moment the higher-ups don’t think it’s pulling its weight, they’ll axe this operation. Me, I’d like to see more of what the two of you can do. Think you can show me?”

Denji felt a pounding in his chest so hard it practically squeezed a *woof!* out of him. “Leave it to me! I’m gonna kick this mystery’s ass! I mean, I’ll solve the hell out of it!”

“I’m sure you will, Denji. And you, Power?” Makima turned her ice-cold gaze on the fiend.

Power was caught off guard and in no mood to be agreeable. “Sure, I’ll do it.” As she turned the situation over in her mind, however, her enthusiasm rose. Pumping a fist in the air, she cried, “A mystery! A missing persons case even! The perfect chance for Detective Magician Power to strut her stuff!”

Makima cocked her head. Denji, looking more than thoroughly unenthused, said, “Ignore her. She’s geeking out over a detective cartoon for babies.”

“Detective cartoon? Oh, that thing that’s on TV every night. Well, Power, let’s see if you can do as good a job as Detective Magician would,” Makima said, smiling.

“Course I can!” said Power, nodding vigorously. Her face flushed. In her mind, she could already see herself on a glittering stage, unveiling secrets to all and sundry and basking in the adulation. Power and Denji were about to charge out of the room when Makima added, almost as an afterthought, “By the way, they’ve called in some civilian devil hunters too. Try to get along, will you?”

+++

From the city center, the trip to the property took two hours by train. Then an hour and a half on a bus. Then an hour on another bus. Then a half-hour hike up a mountain. When Makima had called their destination “isolated,” it had been an understatement. Three days after their briefing, Denji and Power arrived, shoulders heaving. They collapsed into the tall grass.

“Ugh! Finally made it!”

“Who’d wanna stay out here in the boonies?”

“You think you’ve got it bad? I had to tag along just to escort you two out of your patrol area.” Aki took a drag from his cigarette. “All right, I’m going home. Don’t get any bright ideas. You know what’ll happen if you try to make a run for it.”

Denji and Power eyeballed their guardian. “Damn right we know,” said Denji. “And like hell I’m running away. I promised Ms. Makima I’d do her proud, and I’m gonna!”

“Can’t you trust your own roommates, Topknot? What a small, withered little heart you must have!”

“If you want my trust, try getting a better attitude. Anyway, job’s all yours, and I suggest you do it right. If you tarnish the good name of Public Safety, you’ll get it from me.” With that, Aki started back down the mountain.

“God, he never shuts up, does he?” Denji said.

“He’s a sad little man,” said Power.

Feeling a little lighter after letting off steam about Aki, Power turned to their assignment. A wind blew over the mountain, carrying scents of grass and earth that reminded her of her time living in the wilderness with Meowy. A large Western-style house rose behind a vine-choked gate. Its whitewashed walls stood out against the gloomy forest beyond. It almost looked like a painting. If a mystery was going to happen anywhere, it would happen here.

It was a scene constructed for none other than the great Detective Power.

“So this is where people have been disappearing, huh?” said Denji.

“Missing persons! Mystery! Truly this is the place for me!”

Denji gave Power a funny look. “I’ve been afraid to ask since we left the house, but ... what the hell are you wearing?”

“What do you think? It’s just like Detective Magician’s!” She tilted the top hat on her head at a jaunty angle and spun happily around. “Suits me, doesn’t it? I made Topknot buy it for me, and all I need do in return is clean the bathroom for a month!”

“Seriously ... what?”

“Ga ha ha ha! You’re right! Scouring like a servant is beneath me! But once I’ve done it, the hat is mine!”

“And you’re gonna go up against a devil in that thing?” Denji looked incredulous.

“Even Makima thought it was a good idea! ’Twill hide my horns from these simple hill people!”

“Whatever. Not my problem.” Denji didn’t bother to get off the ground.

Power, meanwhile, flung her fist toward the clear blue sky, cackling maniacally. “Ga ha ha ha! A case! A detective! An assistant! An audience! Everything is prepared!”

“I know what the case is, and I see the detective, but who’s the assistant?”

“Why, you, of course, Denji.”

“Uh, what?”

“And there’s the audience to acclaim my work!” Power gestured to a group of about a dozen men congregating at the gate. They were probably the civilian devil hunters Makima had mentioned, but as far as Power was concerned, they were there to witness her extraordinary work and shower her with praise.

One of the men loped toward them with a grim expression on his face. He wore a tracksuit and carried a long katana. “My name’s Kenzo,” he said. “I don’t recognize you two. Don’t tell me you’re devil hunters too.”

Power put her hands on her hips, thrust out her chest, and announced, “Indeed we are. I am the great Detective Power!”

“Say what?” said Denji.

“And this is my assistant, Denji.”

As Denji sputtered, the man’s frown deepened. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. A couple of kids like you? What can you do?”

At last, Denji stood. “I dunno who you are, but we’re here to do a job, and do it damn well. So back off, grandpa.”

“Indeed we are, grandpa!”

“I’m twenty-five, you brats!” Kenzo shook his fist. “Listen up. This ain’t a playground. You get in our way, there’s gonna be serious trouble.” He spat on the ground and strode off.

“What’s his problem?” Denji muttered.

“Don’t mind him. He’s just a spectator.”

As they spoke, the iron gate opened with a groan. To Power, it sounded like the fanfare at the beginning of an action movie. Another rush of glee ran through her. The man who appeared in the open gate, however, was a letdown. He was nothing like her outsized expectations—just a weathered, middle-aged man.

He offered the devil hunters a deep bow. “Thank you all for coming so far out

of your way. I do hope you'll be able to help me."

+++

After identifying himself as Mr. Kanbayashi, the man ushered everyone through the gate. As he led them in with slow, heavy steps, he spoke, sounding tired.

"This villa once belonged to a certain wealthy individual," he began. "But they lost interest in vacationing up here and sold it to me. I renovated it into an inn where visitors could experience nature in its purest form. But at the soft opening, one of the guests disappeared during the night ... along with all my staff."

Kenzo interrupted. "Just to be clear, are you sure they didn't run off on their own?"

"That would very much surprise me. The only way out of here is the bus that stops at the foot of the mountain, and apparently none of them boarded it." Mr. Kanbayashi's voice grew grimmer with every word.

Kenzo snorted. "Sure sounds like the work of a devil, then, doesn't it?"

"Just what I thought," Mr. Kanbayashi nodded. "If this isn't resolved, the inn is doomed. I hope that all of you together can find out what's behind these disappearances."

A laugh arose from the group. "Ga ha ha ha! In the hands of the great Detective Power, the knot of a mystery all but unravels itself! Don't you agree, assistant?"

"I told you, I'm not your assistant!"

Gazes, profoundly suspicious or deeply concerned, turned toward the wild-eyed girl in the top hat and the seedy-looking delinquent beside her. Power's mind automatically edited them into admiring looks of respect.

Mr. Kanbayashi opened the heavy front door of the villa to reveal a spacious entry hall. A carved front desk awaited visitors, and two picture windows set high over the door let in the afternoon sunlight. A thin layer of dust covered the

desk, betraying the fact that the inn hadn't seen visitors in some time.

Mr. Kanbayashi showed the group a map. "Seen from above, the building has the shape of a cross. The front desk is at the head of that cross."

They proceeded along a red carpet and reached the crossing. Mr. Kanbayashi explained that guest rooms were to the left and a staff area to the right. The staff area was mostly empty at the moment, but it contained administrative offices and storage spaces, along with a kitchen stocked with staples and instant meals.

"Yes! Food!" Denji exclaimed, lunging for the door.

Power leapt after him. "We feast!"

Smiling nervously, Mr. Kanbayashi said, "Please help yourselves. There's nothing fresh, only supplies that will keep, but I've ensured there's enough to feed all of you for several days."

The party returned to the crossing and made their way to the lower section of the cross. Kenzo pointed to a small door as they passed it. "Hey, where does that go?"

"Ah, that's the power room." Mr. Kanbayashi opened the door, revealing a cramped, dimly lit room crowded with a profusion of pipes and wires. In the dead center squatted a huge machine, presumably a generator. The floor trembled faintly with the hum of motors.

"I must ask you to stay out of this room," said Mr. Kanbayashi. "The machinery is quite expensive." Quickly, he urged the group on.

They continued down the long hallway until they abruptly emerged into an open space, the size of a gymnasium, beneath a high, vaulted ceiling. This, Mr. Kanbayashi told them, was the recreation room. Near the entrance was a bar area with tables where guests could drink and chat. Farther along, the group could make out a pool table, a ping-pong table, and a dartboard, among other amusements. Hugging one wall was a lavish, illuminated stage.

"Well done!" said Power. "You built a stage for my grand deduction!"

"No, no," said Mr. Kanbayashi, waving her aside. "That's for musical concerts,

banquet entertainment, that sort of thing. The entire room is soundproofed so the noise doesn't bother the other guests, no matter how boisterous it gets in here."

Meanwhile, Denji had finally found something that interested him. "Is that a pool table? You owe me a game, Power!"

Power sniffed, annoyed at being dismissed so casually. "What a child you are! Excited by the prospect of smacking balls together."

"I'll bet you've never even played pool."

"Of course I have!"

"Liar!"

"Would I lie? I was the undefeated champion in a professional pool tournament!"

"Not even! There's no way that's true!"

"Pipe down, you two!" Kenzo shouted, a blue vein bulging on his forehead. "Some of us are here to hunt devils!"

One of the other hunters patted him on the shoulder. "Take it easy, Ken. Don't forget we're not just getting the base pay this time. There's an incentive for bringing in results. Think of it this way—a couple of useless louts will just make our share bigger."

"You've got a point." Kenzo turned with a snort to examine the recreation room. "What's on the far side over there?"

"Ah, that area's still being refurbished ..."

The group followed Mr. Kanbayashi across the recreation room and into the unfinished area. A dark, narrow passageway stretched beyond the doorway. A few yards in, it turned a corner, then another. The group stuck close to the wall, feeling their way along. The long hallway zigged and zagged. It was like a maze, except that there was only one way to go. The lighting was inconsistent at best, and the air felt thick and stagnant.

"The hell is this place?" Kenzo asked.

Mr. Kanbayashi shook his head. “I’m not sure myself. Perhaps someone was trying to build a play space. The villa has gone through several owners, and the original blueprints no longer exist.”

Eventually they reached the end of the hall, but all they found was an emergency exit. They made their way back to the recreation room, where Mr. Kanbayashi gave each group a key to a guest room and said he would be back the next day to see how things were going. The *clack* of the front door closing signaled the hunters to begin their work. Any sense of leisure was gone; the focus and tension were suddenly palpable. The sixteen devil hunters were ready to take on the mystery of the disappearances.

“Ga ha ha! So it begins!” Power assured herself that this would be a simple case. When she applied her genius intellect to the problem, it would be solved in moments.

She could spare a few minutes to shoot some pool first.

“Listen up, everyone!” Kenzo raised his hands to get the group’s attention. He’d been a devil hunter for seven years and considered himself a consummate professional. He’d survived some tough scrapes. As seriously as he took his work, he wasn’t above thinking that a big team job was a chance to further burnish his reputation. “I’ve got an idea. Since we don’t know who or what we’re dealing with, why not work together?”

“Work together?” asked one of the other hunters, crossing his arms suspiciously.

“That’s right,” said Kenzo. “These disappearances sound like the work of a devil, but we don’t know where it’s hiding. That’s problem number one.”

“Sure we do. It’s somewhere in this inn!”

“Exactly. One wing for guest rooms, one wing for staff. Big rec room. And that weird-ass hallway that goes out to the back of the building. Floor plan’s simple enough, but that’s a lot of area to comb. That ain’t all, though.” The assembled hunters followed Kenzo’s finger as he pointed toward the nearest wall. “We can’t be sure it isn’t out *there*. Plenty of devils make dens in the wilderness and hit a place from outside.”

“Gotta admit, you’ve got a point,” the other hunter said. Amongst the group, there were nods of affirmation.

“That’s why we need to cooperate. It’s a waste of energy to scatter and search the place one by one. I say we split into teams and cover assigned areas. We’ll keep in touch and gradually expand our search radius. Everyone pulls their weight, of course. This rec room will make a great base for—”

Kenzo was interrupted by a yell from the pool table. “I saw that, Power! You moved the ball!”

“Sore loser! You think I’d cheat?”

“You better believe I think that!”

“Hey, you kids!” Kenzo shouted, louder than he meant to. He’d worked with devil hunters of all stripes and learned to get along with most, but these two were beyond him. They didn’t demonstrate even basic courtesy, they had no sense of cooperation, for some reason the girl was wearing a stupid top hat, and now they were goofing off and shooting pool in the middle of an extermination job.

Denji and Power didn’t even put down their cues as they turned to address the distraction.

“What is it, Gramps?” Denji asked.

“You’re a noisy one, Gramps,” Power added.

“I told you, I’m nobody’s Gramps! Get over here and listen to what I have to say, both of you. This is important!”

Denji and Power exchanged a look. Denji grinned and said, “Nah, we’re good.”

“Excuse me?”

“I promised Ms. Makima I’d get results. That doesn’t mean playing nice and splitting the work with randos. I’m trying to make a living for myself here!”

“Correct!” said Power. “Anyhow, no need to worry. The great Detective Magician will solve this case. You peasants have no part to play in my drama!”

“I don’t understand a word either of you is saying,” Kenzo growled. He

stopped short. “Just a sec. Did you say Makima? As in the Chief Cabinet Secretary’s personal devil hunter? Are you guys *Public Safety*?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Denji said offhandedly. His response sent a noisy murmur through the assembled group.

The hunters of Public Safety’s Special Division were an elite force on the front lines against the devils. Civilian hunters held them in something close to reverence. They were said to exterminate devils others could barely touch.

“What’s Public Safety doing here?” Kenzo hissed.

A hunter beside him said, “You flunked out before you got to Public Safety, didn’t you?”

“Shaddup!” Kenzo snapped. “I’ll put my skills against theirs any day.” Privately, he winced. He’d taken the hiring exam for Public Safety once and had washed out.

The other man put his hands up and backed away when he saw Kenzo grip the hilt of his katana. “Hey, my bad, man. But the kid’s got a point. There are incentives on this job, and that pits us against each other. Team up with the wrong person and your life could be over.”

“But ... wait ...”

Kenzo’s attempts to keep the hunters unified came to nothing. They started to head off in every direction. As he stood, thunderstruck, the shouts of the two pool players rang out behind him.

“That’s the end! I declare this game over!”

“Hey, I was about to sink that ball!”

“I’ve got a case to solve. No more time for games!”

“Screw that! You knew you were about to lose! This counts as my win, got it?”

“Sure, I’ll let the baby have his balls! Don’t cry, baby!”

“Who’s crying here?”

Kenzo’s fists clenched. “How could these jackasses be in Public Safety?” he demanded of no one in particular.

He looked up, struck by a thought. *Were* they in Public Safety? Would a crack organization want anything to do with these ignorant, troublemaking youngsters? He didn't believe it. There had to be some other explanation for their ridiculous presence.

Maybe I'll keep an eye on them for a while, Kenzo decided. Observation. That would be his watchword.

"All right!" Power declared, her hands on her hips. "Enough relaxation. Down to business, assistant!"

"Stop calling me that! And I need a break after that game." With an exasperated shrug, Denji flopped down on a sofa near the bar.

"What a useless sidekick." From her pocket, Power took the magnifying glass she'd made Aki buy her along with the hat. She strode to the wall and pointed the glass at it. *Observation is the door to the truth*. That was Detective Magician's catchphrase.

"Something up with the wall?" Kenzo asked as Power squinted at the whitewash.

As far as Power knew, there wasn't. It had just been the first thing in front of her. But she wasn't about to let the audience know that. She turned to Kenzo with a cryptic gaze. "I can smell it. The smell of mystery!"

"The smell of mystery?" Kenzo gave the wall an experimental sniff. "Can't say I do. You think it's something only you can sense?"

"Indeed! Some clues reveal themselves only to the greatest of detectives." Magnifying glass still in hand, Power headed toward the hallway that led to the front door. She knelt and examined the red carpet, picking at the fuzz. Why? Why not?

Kenzo loomed behind her. "Is there something going on with the floor now?"

"Yes! The smell of mystery."

"You can smell mystery on ... the carpet?" Kenzo bent down to look. "Still doesn't make sense to me, but leave it to Public Safety to consider all the details."

“So true,” Power grinned, arms spread wide. “Observation is the door to the truth!”

“Now you’re talking sense,” Kenzo said. The hint of admiration egged Power on.

“Mystery! I smell mystery!”

“You don’t say?”

“As a great detective, I can sense this place is positively brimming with it!”

“Go on!”

“Observation! Observation is the door to the truth!” Power announced once again.

“I get ya!”

Spurred by Kenzo’s appreciation, Power, now very high on her horse, pointed the magnifying glass every which way as the two neared the entrance. A group of hunters was hanging out in the front hall.

“What’re you guys up to?” Kenzo called.

“We thought we’d have a look around outside,” said one of the hunters, “but we can’t get the door open.”

“Say what?” Kenzo shoved past the men, grabbed the heavy doorknob, and gave it a good rattle. “This looks like the kind of deal that locks on both sides. Guess our host accidentally locked us in when he left. Nothing to do but wait until he checks on us tomorrow, huh?”

“Huh! That’s the end of that, then.” The hunters shrugged and started to disperse when a voice called out.

“Windows? Up there? I smell mystery!” Power brandished her magnifying glass at two picture windows over the front door. Unlike Kenzo, the other hunters ignored her proclamations.

“I say, the smell of mystery positively oozes from— Hey!” Power glared after the hunters. A feral growl rose in the back of her throat.

Only Kenzo was left to admire her. “So what are you investigating next?” he

asked.

“The investigation is over!” Power turned on her heel. If there was no glory to be had that night, she might as well retreat to her room.

Kenzo, however, understood her words differently. “Over? Don’t tell me you’ve already figured it out.”

Power stopped. Slowly she turned. Fixing Kenzo with a look of pure, guileless innocence, she said, “But of course! I long ago undid the knot of this mystery!”

“What? Are you serious?”

Seeing Kenzo practically dumbstruck soothed Power’s hurt feelings. She all but skipped to the guest hall. She entered her surprisingly modern room to find Denji already splayed across the bed, snoring.

“Blast it! How can the assistant sleep while the detective is working?” she demanded, bopping Denji on the head. She earned only a single lazy glance and a big yawn.

“What’s the big deal?” Denji grunted. “If a devil shows up, I’ll do my thing, but as long as we’re waiting there’s no reason for me to bust my ass. No way am I gonna waste a good bed.”

Power considered this. She crossed her arms and nodded. “There’s some truth to that. In fact, I was thinking the same thing.”

The two of them shared an unwavering loyalty to their appetites.

In the next room over, Kenzo had his ear pressed to the wall. “What’s Public Safety figured out?” he muttered. He’d done a full sweep of the building without turning up anything of note. The other devil hunters’ searches had been equally fruitless, and now they were scrambling for ideas. It made it all the more conspicuous—and all the more bemusing—that the two Public Safety reps had hightailed it to their room.

Kenzo happened to have been assigned the room next to theirs, so he decided to keep an eye, or at least an ear, on their doings. He’d heard them talking about something, but things had been quiet for the last ten minutes or so. The only sound that reached his ear through the wall was a faint duet of

snores.

“They wouldn’t sleep on the job, would they?” he wondered aloud, looking at the wall with amazement. “No ... there has to be some mistake.”

He looked out the decoratively barred window at the twilight sky. If there was a devil lurking somewhere, it would most likely be active at night, prowling under cover of darkness. It occurred to Kenzo that since he’d arrived at the villa, he’d felt the oppressive presence of some unseen enemy. The other hunters must have felt it too, if only subconsciously. Would their nerves hold through the night? In a battle against a devil, an instant’s inattention could be fatal.

Kenzo nodded with sudden understanding. Whatever the two hunters in the next room had learned, they’d decided to rest up for the coming battle. It was a bold strategy, but a wise one. He shouldn’t have doubted that Public Safety knew what it was doing.

Well, he wasn’t going to be left behind. He’d piggyback on Public Safety’s idea. Kenzo set the alarm on the bedside clock and, feeling proud of himself, climbed into bed.

He awoke three hours later as the hands of the clock neared nine. It was dark outside, and the pin-drop silence made every tick of the clock’s hands land with a thud. Kenzo felt lighter after his nap. Clearly he’d made the right choice. He pressed his ear to the wall. All he heard was snoring. He wondered when, exactly, the Public Safety reps were planning to leap into action. They must have something up their sleeves. Well, he wouldn’t let them get the jump on him.

“Okay, bring it on,” Kenzo said softly. “I’m prepared for anything.” He felt centered. Ready. He tried to keep his breathing low as he waited for the moment. He could wait as long as it took.

As it turned out, it took until his room was full of birdsong and the rich light of morning. Then, at last, he finally heard the door to the next room open.

“They ... they just slept all night!” Kenzo’s bloodshot eyes went wide. He’d spent the entire night crouched at his door, katana at the ready. “I can’t do it. I can’t parse their moves. Nothing makes sense. Are we even following the same agenda?” Interrupted sleep had left Kenzo in a daze. He couldn’t remember the

last time he'd felt so off his game. Nonetheless, he rushed out of his room to meet the two Public Safety agents.

Power gave a big, satisfied stretch. "Mmm! 'Tis a fine morning!"

"Wow! I slept the *crap* outta that night! A fancy mattress puts things on a whole other level!" Denji stretched too, then stopped and put a hand to his neck. "Hey. Power, you sucked my blood again, didn't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Power said earnestly, wiping her mouth.

Kenzo lunged at the pair, fist raised. "You two! What were you thinking? Why would you sleep through the whole night?"

"Huh?"

"You need something, Gramps?"

"N-no ... Never mind." Kenzo's hand slowly fell to his side. He couldn't criticize them without admitting he'd spent the night eavesdropping through the wall.

The Public Safety agents headed for the kitchen, where they were soon enmeshed in new arguments.

"Hey, there's only five of those bean buns! You can't take all of them!"

"Ga ha ha! The early bird gets the worm!"

The other devil hunters began to filter in, all of them obviously fatigued, rubbing their eyes and snarling at each other. To Kenzo, it was clear that the tension was getting to them.

"Geez, I ran around all night and nothing happened. Is there really a devil here?"

"Maybe it got scared and ran off with its tail between its legs when it saw all us hunters show up!"

"Screw that! If it's gone, so's our reward!"

As the group drifted toward the recreation room, another hunter rushed in, his face pale. "Hey! Anybody here bother to do a head count?"

Without anyone noticing, half the devil hunters had vanished.

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“I went around all the guest rooms to be sure,” said the hunter, now surrounded by the remaining group, with a faint tremor in his voice. “Sixteen of us came here last night, but there are only eight now. I went up and down the halls, knocking on doors, but all the rooms are empty!”

Another hunter scoffed. “So they’re not in their rooms. They’re loafing around somewhere else, that’s all.”

“That’s what I thought, but I can’t find them anywhere,” the distressed hunter countered. When the others suggested the missing hunters might be outside, he shook his head. “The front door’s still locked. So’s the door at the other end of the hall.”

None of the windows were designed to open, and the metal bars made it impossible to climb out even if someone broke the glass. The picture windows over the front door weren’t barred, but they were too high to reach.

“Missing persons,” someone muttered. “Just like in the original report.” A silence fell over the room. With a chill, the hunters realized that a devil had crept in under their noses and cut their number in half.

Kenzo looked at the clock on the wall. “At least Mr. Kanbayashi should be coming by to check on things. I say that when he gets here, we head outside and reassess the situation.”

The hunters spent the time until then searching the house, but they found no sign of their vanished companions. The devil, too, remained hidden. They waited on tenterhooks for the owner of the inn to return.

Finally, someone spoke up. “Where’s the old man, anyway?”

“Yeah, why ain’t he here yet?”

A murmur arose. Long after the appointed hour, as the second evening began to fall, the owner of the villa was nowhere to be seen.

“Maybe there was a miscommunication,” said Kenzo. “Or a seriously unfortunate accident. Not a lot of ways to get word up the mountain. Guess

we'll be spending another night here." At that idea, the other hunters looked unmistakably disturbed.

Then a peal of laughter rang out. "Ga ha ha ha! Stumped, huh? Just as I predicted. I had it all figured out from the start!" Power stood triumphant. She had her assistant, her audience, and her detective gear, but something had been lacking. Now she knew what it was—the deduction to reveal to her adoring fans.

Kenzo approached her, a tinge of desperation in his voice. "You really got something?"

"Of course!"

"Then tell us! I know it's pathetic, but I'm begging for help. You see how things are going here. You Public Safety reps are on to something, aren't you?"

Power, more pleased than ever, nodded magnanimously. "So you're hanging on the great Detective Power's every word. Very smart. Well, since you asked so nicely, I can't say no."

"Watch out, guys!" Denji yelled. "She's a bare-ass liar! Don't trust anything she says!"

"The nerve! I'm a veritable angel sent to fight devils! Ignore the ravings of my assistant."

"How many times do I have to say I'm not your assistant?"

Power ignored the foul look Denji shot her. She strode to the stage as the hunters watched with bated breath. The view from the stage assured her that every eye in the room was indeed on her.

At last Power had what she most longed for—attention. She tugged the brim of her top hat and cleared her throat. "Now to the matter of this missing persons case. 'Tis indeed a mystery even I struggled to solve." She paced the stage theatrically. The *tap, tap, tap* of her footsteps filled the otherwise silent room.

"A riddle. An enigma. Yes, this house is thick with the heady scent of mystery! But there's a turn to every trick, a sleight to every hand. Observation, my

friends. Observation is the door to the truth.” She turned her magnifying glass on her audience. “The culprit is among us tonight!”

These words drew gasps and sent a murmur of fear through the room. As the audience chattered, Power reached into her pocket and took out a knotted rope she had brought from home for this exact moment.

“I’ve undone the knot of ... of ... hold on ...” The knot wouldn’t come undone. She pulled harder, but, unlike in *Detective Magician*, this only seemed to tighten it.

As Power flailed, Kenzo, still pale, spoke. “The culprit’s among us? You mean ... the devil is here right now?”

“What?” Power looked up from the rope and blinked. “Er ... yes, that’s what I mean. That’s it, all right!”

Another wave of astonishment rippled through the group.

“No way! No wonder we couldn’t find the devil!”

“I bet it’s the guy who locked us in to begin with!”

“A devil that can assume human form? Has it been here all along? Or did it join us after we got here?”

Kenzo took a step toward the stage. “Yeah, that’d answer a lot of the questions. But who is it, then? Who’s the devil?”

“I ...” Power coughed. “I can’t tell you yet.”



“Why not?” someone shouted. “That’s the one thing we need to know!” The hunters pressed close to the stage, but Kenzo held up a hand to stop them.

“Hold on,” he said. “It’s easy to make accusations, but if we’re wrong, we could wind up killing an innocent person. Of course she doesn’t want to say anything rash. She’s waiting until she has absolute proof.”

“Er, yes! That’s exactly what I’m doing!”

“Screw that! Who is it?” One of the hunters pulled an absurdly long knife from his jacket and waved it around.

“Take it easy. If we lose our heads, we play right into the devil’s hands. But if you wanna have a go at someone, I’ll be happy to take you on.” Kenzo’s tone was conciliatory, but his hand was on the scabbard of his katana.

The room was a powder keg, the air crackling with tension. The man with the knife glared at Kenzo for a long moment, then turned away with a grunt. “I’m going to my room. Anyone wants a piece of me, come and get it. But don’t be surprised if I’m the one who walks out alive.”

The hunters drifted to their rooms, jumpy and suspicious now, leveling murderous gazes at each other as they went. Finally, only Denji and Power were left in the rec room. As soon as they were alone, Denji exploded.

“I’ve had enough of your bull! You were just saying whatever came into your head! And quoting that stupid cartoon!”

“I certainly was not!” Power refuted. “I think I might be an even better detective than I am a devil hunter. Perhaps I should give up hunting and pursue my true calling! Ga ha ha!”

“Naw, we’re Public Safety. Till death do we part.”

“A man with no dreams, that’s what you are. And here I was about to offer to hire you full-time as my assistant.”

“If you pay me in bread and jam, I might think about it.” Denji stared up at the ceiling and groaned. “Where the hell’s that devil, anyway?”

Come the next day, their numbers were halved again.

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Only four people showed up in the rec room that morning. Three of them were Denji, Power, and Kenzo.

The fourth devil hunter entered the room with his knife drawn and his face pale. “Who was it? Who did it? Who’s the damn devil?”

Kenzo tensed for a fight. The man’s eyes were rimmed with red. Rage and fear were robbing him of his grip on reality. He was ready to snap. Moments like this, Kenzo reminded himself, were when it was most important for a hunter to keep a cool head.

The young woman from Public Safety burst out laughing. “Ga ha ha ha ha! Look at your crazy face! Ga ha ha!”

Kenzo gaped. Why would she pour oil on the fire?

“What the hell are you laughing at?” the other hunter howled.

“All right, everyone. Calm down. *I’m* not the devil, I can tell you that much.” Kenzo figured his best bet was to draw the focus to himself as he talked down the man with the knife.

“Oh yeah? Then answer a question!” The disturbed hunter was on edge. “Something only the real you would know!”

“Try me.”

“This isn’t the first job you and I have worked together. We teamed up once before. Which devil did we fight?”

“The Sea Cucumber Devil. We’d evacuated the civilians and were setting up a dragnet when some freak came plummeting out of the sky and stole the kill from us.”

“Huh. That’s right.” The man turned his knife on Denji and Power. “The devil has to be one of you. Test yourselves. Now!”

Denji and Power looked at each other. “Screw that,” said Denji. “Too much work.”

“Do it!” The man shoved the blade closer.

Denji gave him a not particularly threatened look and sighed. “Power, what’s your favorite thing?”

“Meowy! My least favorite things are vegetables and humans. What’s your favorite thing?”

“Ms. Makima.”

They pointed at each other.

“That’s Power, all right.”

“That’s Denji!”

The man with the knife backed away, scowling. “If none of us is the devil, what the hell’s going on?”

The population of the house had dropped to only four, yet the devil still hadn’t shown itself. It seemed increasingly likely that no one was coming to get them, and there seemed to be no way out of the villa. The bars on the windows were sturdier than they looked. The front and back doors refused to budge. Kenzo felt a dull, mounting panic. This was like slow, deliberate torture.

“I’ll check on the food,” he said, desperate to feel useful. “We need to ration our supplies.”

When he got to the kitchen, the blood drained from his face. “No! It’s all gone!” The pantry, which had contained several more days’ worth of food, was empty.

Behind him, the fourth hunter swore. “What do we do now?” His voice choked as if he were holding back tears.

Power punched at the air. “This is the devil’s doing! It’ll pay for this!”

Denji looked at her closely. “Hey, Power. Are those breadcrumbs on your shirt?”

“They are not,” she replied, primly brushing the crumbs away.

“You ate all the food, didn’t you?”

“How dare you accuse me of such a thing! I haven’t eaten so much as a slice

of bread since the day I was born!”

“I *know* that’s not true!” Denji rolled his eyes.

“Get serious, lady,” Kenzo demanded. “Did you eat our rations?”

“This ain’t funny, you little witch!” the fourth devil hunter added angrily.

As the men closed in on her, Power backed away. “You’ve got it all wrong! He’s the liar! He’s lying through his teeth!” She pointed at Denji. “He’s the devil hiding in this house, and he’s trying to pin everything on poor innocent me!”

“Is that so?” Kenzo asked.

The two civilian devil hunters turned on Denji. “You say *he’s* the devil?” said the fourth hunter.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” said Denji. “Are you kidding me? I passed your dumbass test, Power! You said I was the real deal!”

“I didn’t say anything like that!”

“Why, you ...” Denji gritted his teeth. “Look, you guys heard her. Remember? Huh?”

The other hunters continued to scrutinize him. “When I suggested we all work together, you were the first to push back,” Kenzo said.

“Yeah, he was, wasn’t he?” said the fourth hunter. “And look where splitting up got us!”

“Hey, no! Don’t jerk me around! You know I’m not the devil!”

“Yes, he is! He’s the devil!” Power shrieked. “The great Detective Power is never mistaken!” She grabbed at him.

“Dammit, Power! If you screw me over again, you’re gonna wish you never—”

Kenzo whipped out his katana and leveled it at Denji. “If you so much as twitch, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

Denji raised his fists. “Dude, I’d like to see you try.”

“I’m warning you! Don’t move or we’ll have to assume you’re the devil,” Kenzo repeated.

Denji didn't have an answer to that. He kept his fists up, but all he gave Kenzo was a glare.

Slowly, Kenzo lowered his blade. He reminded himself to stay cool. The worst thing to do in this situation was panic. "Okay. Good. Now, you seem pretty suspicious, but it's not like we have watertight evidence. If you're not the devil, go ahead and prove it."

"Yeah? And how am I supposed to do that?"

"Sorry, but the best bet is to tie you up," Kenzo sighed. "If there are any more attacks while you're bound hand and foot, we'll know you didn't do it."

"That's the stupidest crap I ever— Okay, whatever. What if nothing happens?"

"All the better for us. If we can contact the outside, we can get Public Safety to take a closer look at this whole thing." As if to assuage Denji, Kenzo added, "Then, if you're really innocent, I'm sure they'll figure it out."

"This plan sucks," Denji whined. "We don't know if help is even coming. I don't wanna sit trussed up like a turkey until who knows when."

"Fine," said the fourth devil hunter. "One night, then. We'll let you go in the morning. How's that?"

"It doesn't matter because *I'm not the damn devil!*" Denji stopped short of letting a fist fly. A thought had just occurred to him, and he didn't like it. "Y'know ... Ms. Makima told us to try to get along." He grabbed his fist with the other hand and forced it down. "Dammit, fine. One night."

"Good," Kenzo said. "Then it's settled."

He and the other hunter bound Denji's hands and feet with rope from the staff rooms and tied him to a post. A film of sweat clung to their skin as they remained tense for the rest of the day. Almost before they knew it, the sun was swallowed by the western hills. They were about to spend their third night in a house with a devil.

"We ought to get some shut-eye," said Kenzo. "I say two of us keep guard while the other sleeps. Who wants to take the first rest?"

Power threw up her hand immediately. “Me! I’m so sleepy!”

“All right. We’ve got about six hours until sunrise. We’ll sleep in shifts of two hours.”

“Will do!”

A shout rose from the post. “I’m not gonna forget this, Power!”

“Oooh, the nasty devil is glaring at me! I’m so scared!” Power traipsed out of the rec room, avoiding Denji’s gaze. Denji and the other two hunters were left behind in the cavernous room.

“Another day, and the old man’s still AWOL,” said the fourth hunter, contemplating the dull shimmer of his blade. “I’m starting to think we’ll be stuck in this place for the rest of our lives.” His cheeks were hollow and there were bags under his eyes. It looked like he was reaching the end of his rope.

“Like hell we are,” said Kenzo, trying to sound hopeful. “Even if something happened to that guy, somebody’s bound to notice when a bunch of devil hunters go missing at once. They’ll come for us.”

“Don’t you guys ever shut up?” Denji growled. “I’m trying to get some sleep here.”

“You can sleep like that?”

“I can sleep anywhere! And it’s getting late. If I don’t rest up now, tomorrow’s gonna suck hard.”

Kenzo stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I think I see. No matter the situation, it’s crucial to rest when you can. So that’s how Public Safety does it ... Wait, is he asleep already?”

Only the sound of Denji’s snores answered him.

Several hours passed. At midnight in the mountains, the inn was as silent as if sound itself had died.

“What’s that lady doing? I said two-hour rests. She oughta be back by now to take her shift.” Kenzo looked at the rec room clock, getting angrier and angrier. He turned to Denji. A trail of drool dangled from his mouth. “He’s out cold too. Guess you have to have nerves of steel to work in Public Safety.”

“We don’t know if he *is* Public Safety,” the man with the knife said in a low voice.

“Yeah. Fair enough.”

“I’ll keep an eye on this guy, Kenzo. You go wake the other one.”

“I’ll be right back.” Kenzo had been growing worried about the fourth hunter’s paranoid muttering, but the cool-headed, reasonable suggestion reassured him. Maybe the guy still had his wits about him. Kenzo headed for the guest wing.

As soon as the door closed, the man with the knife crept toward the sleeping Denji. “Finally alone.”

Kenzo had misjudged the situation. The man’s detachment came not from calmness, but from a terror beyond panic. His dark eyes were unfocused and his fingers trembled.

“You’re the devil, aren’t you?” he whispered. “You can’t fool me. I’m not gonna get a moment’s sleep with you alive. I’m not as patient as Kenzo.”

The rec room was soundproofed. No one would hear the screams. And if worse came to worst, he could blame it on the devil.

As the man gazed down at the sleeping Denji and raised his knife, he said, “Do me a favor. Die for me. Pretty please?”

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“Hrrgh?” Power heaved herself up in bed. She thought she’d heard Denji cry out, but it must have been a dream. “I’m so hungry,” she muttered. Her stomach gave a little rumble of agreement. She hadn’t had anything but water since eating everything in the pantry. “Denji ... Blood ...”

She leapt for the other bed and landed on nothing but a soft, springy mattress. There was no sign of her partner under the covers. She grunted in confusion.

A fierce pounding came at the door. “Wake up, you! It’s time to take your shift!”

The noise cleared the fuzz from Power's head. "Oh, right." She'd fingered Denji as the devil and left him tied up in the rec room. Of course.

"Are you in there? Answer me!"

"I hear you! Sheesh! Why must you be so noisy?" Power grabbed the top hat waiting by her pillow and put it on. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she opened the door.

Kenzo was standing in the faint glow of an emergency light. He let out a sigh of relief. "You're alive! When you didn't answer, I thought maybe you'd been taken too."

"Where's Denji?"

"Sleeping like a baby in the rec room, at least for now." As they fell into step beside each other, Kenzo gave Power a wary look. "Hey ... do you really think he's the devil? It's just that the longer I watch him, the less sure I am."

"Denji is not the culprit," said Power.

"He's not?" Kenzo said, incredulous. "Then why did you tell us he was?"

"I did no such thing."

"What? I mean ... what?" Kenzo looked wildly at Power for some sign that she was joking, but her face remained impassive. In reality, she had already lost interest in the conversation. It was about time to rescue Denji, she thought. He could show his gratitude by giving her a drink of blood.

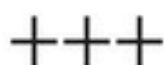
"Now wait right here!" Kenzo implored. "If he's not the devil, what have I done?"

"Tied up an innocent man and abandoned him," Power said haughtily. "You ought to be ashamed! You dupe! You fool! You cretin!"

"No ... no ..."

Still arguing, the two walked into the rec room—and stopped, speechless.

There was no one inside.



“But ... they were here a minute ago!” Kenzo’s voice rose in panic. He rushed to the spot where Denji had been tied up. Both Denji and the other hunter were gone.

Had they run away? No. The rope used to restrain Denji was gone too. Did that mean he was still tied up? More disappearances. And now a team of sixteen devil hunters was reduced to two.

Behind Kenzo, Power broke the silence with gales of laughter.

“Have you lost your—” Kenzo stared at Power cackling triumphantly in utter disbelief. “No! It was you all along!” Thinking back, it was clear that this woman had been leading them astray from the very start. Kenzo’s mistake had been assuming that the devil would try to avoid notice, rather than impersonate the loudest, most attention-hogging member of the group.

She’s the devil! And she played me for a fool!

Power ignored Kenzo as he backed away in horror. Instead, she vaulted onto the stage and pulled the knotted rope out of her pocket again. “I’ve undone the knot of this mystery!”

“Say what?” Kenzo was completely lost.

Power tugged on the ends of the rope, which remained as tightly knotted as ever. Grunting with effort, she pulled until veins bulged on her forehead. At last the rope simply tore in two. She held the frayed pieces aloft with pride. “As I was saying ... Knot of mystery! Undone!”

Kenzo stared at the stage, incredulous.

Power continued her performance. “There’s a devil in this house who makes people disappear. First one! Then two! Then three! Until there’s only you and me! And I know I’m not the culprit. By process of elimination ...” Power looked positively thrilled with herself as she raised her hand, palm up. A spurt of blood from her wrist formed itself into a scythe. “You’re the devil!”

“What?” Kenzo exclaimed. The crimson scythe came sweeping down from the stage. In the nick of time, he raised his katana to block it, but the force of Power’s blow knocked the sword out of his hands.

“You damn devil!” Power shouted. “You die now!”

“*You’re* the devil!” Kenzo shouted back.

“I’m not the devil! I’m a detective! A great detective!” Power raised the scythe, grinning like the Grim Reaper.

Kenzo had no idea what was going on. All he knew was that he had to get out of there. He turned and ran. With a rush of wind, the scythe grazed his calf. Kenzo gasped. The wound was agonizing, but if he stopped, she would be on him. He gritted his teeth and plunged into the hallway as if fleeing from pain itself.

What next?

The front door was locked. He was trapped in the inn. Could he make a run for the mazelike corridor on the other side of the rec room? No, that only led to another locked door. Hide in the guest rooms or staff wing? Without his weapon, he’d be a sitting duck. No matter which way he ran, sooner or later he’d be trapped.

An idea struck him. “That’s it!” he whispered.

Kenzo staggered into the little room between the entryway and the rec room, the room the hunters had been warned not to enter. Had that only been a few days ago? Inside, it was dark, cluttered with pipes and wires, with the hum of the generator blocking all other sound. If he could lie low for just a few minutes, Power might pass by, and then he could double back to the rec room and grab his sword.

His hope proved short-lived.

“There you are!” Power cried, kicking the door open with brute force. She slid into the room. Her shadow, crowned with the long arc of the scythe, rose behind her.

“How’d you find me?”

“The smell of blood, of course! Foolish devil! Did you really think you could evade the great Detective Power!”

Kenzo glanced at his wounded calf. “Hey! I’m not a devil! What are *you*?”

“I’ve told you over and over! Public Safety’s one and only genius detective, Power!”

“What kind of detective kills people with a bloody scythe?”

Slowly and deliberately, Power stalked toward Kenzo. He scuttled back until he hit the generator. His back to it, he pleaded. “Wait! Listen! Mr. Kanbayashi told us not to mess with this machine ...”

“Die, devil!”

“Why won’t you listen to me?” Kenzo curled himself into a ball. The scythe blade missed him by inches and sliced into the generator directly behind him. As Power stared in surprise, the generator threw out sparks, then exploded with a *FWOOOSH*. A flood of murky liquid sprayed from the tear.

“What the hell?” Kenzo shouted.

“Yikes!” Power added.

The spray hit them full force, driving them out of the power room. By the time the flood subsided, they’d washed up back in the rec room. The lights were flickering erratically, presumably from the damage to the generator. Kenzo and Power jumped to their feet—and discovered they’d been dyed red.

Kenzo frowned. “Is this ...”

“Blood!” said Power, licking a finger experimentally. “Why was the generator full of blood? Explain! Oops!”

Power was knocked off balance as the blood-soaked carpet beneath her feet began to writhe and squirm. Kenzo pitched forward.

A low moan rumbled through the house.

“It can’t be ...” As Kenzo tried to scramble to his feet, a large yellow droplet fell to the carpet nearby. The spatter burned his skin. He looked up, his face falling in disbelief, to see countless similar droplets dripping from the walls and ceiling.

“What’s going on?” Power demanded. She rested her crimson scythe on her shoulder and moved in for a better look.

“Be careful!” Kenzo shouted. “It’s acid!”

“Acid?” Power asked quizzically.

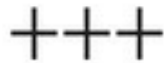
“It’ll burn right through you!”

“Huh?” Power looked up at the ceiling just as a rain of droplets came pelting down. She and Kenzo both hurried to dodge the deluge. “What is this?”

“So that’s how it is.” Kenzo crouched low. “The devil’s not invisible. It’s been right in front of us all along.”

“What are you talking about?” Power had turned her scythe into a gigantic umbrella. Kenzo dove under it with her.

“This house *is* the devil!” he said.



“You mean the whole house?” Power looked around, her brow furrowed. The floors and walls were indeed squirming as if alive, and the rain of acid was growing stronger.

Kenzo spoke quickly. “It finally makes sense. Think about the shape of the house in human terms. We came in through the head. The guest wing and staff wing are the arms. And this big space has to be the stomach.”

“This is a stomach?” Power questioned.

“That’s stomach acid. I bet the others got digested.”

Power yelped.

“The room’s soundproof, remember?” Kenzo went on. “Any time people met up here for strategy meetings or whatever, the house could digest them and the rest of us wouldn’t hear a blessed thing. It could’ve eaten all of us at once, but I guess it likes playing cat and mouse.”

“True, devils love to feed on human fear,” Power confirmed.

“That explains the weird corridor past the rec room too. Why it’s so long and twisty even though it only goes one way. It’s gotta be the intestines!”

“Hmm ...”

“And that so-called generator in the power room is the most important part of all. It’s just off to one side of the crossing. If we keep the body analogy going, you just happened to stab this thing in the heart!”

“I never ‘happen’ to do things!” Power’s voice rose with confidence. “The heart! Yes, of course. The great Detective Power knew it from the very beginning. What a genius I am! I deserve a Nobel Prize!” In her mind, waves of adulation crashed over her from the far corners of the world. *Long live Power! Genius detective! Too amazing to believe!*

“Not likely.” Kenzo shook his head. “You didn’t mean to do that. I mean, you shouted ‘Die’ at me.”

Power insisted. “I was talking to the devil house.”

“You were attacking me!”

“I never attacked you.”

“What’s wrong with you, lady?”

Kill ... Kill ... Kill ... Kill ...

The walls and floor heaved violently as the house resounded with the sound of the devil’s hatred. The acid rain grew into a veritable maelstrom.

“Damn rain!” Power said. “My blood umbrella won’t hold much longer.” She had all the blood that had gushed from the generator to draw on, but it was hard to control blood that wasn’t hers.

“You’re a fiend, aren’t you?” said Kenzo. “I heard rumors they’ve got them in Public Safety Special Division 4.”

“Correct! I am Detective Power, Public Safety’s famed mystery-solving fiend!”

“Um ... okay, sure. Anyway, let’s try to make our way to the front hall. At least we can escape the digestive system and get out from under this acid.”

They worked their way to the rec room door, only to find it shut fast by some trick of the devil. Kenzo cursed to himself. “It won’t budge.”

“Leave it to the detective!” said Power. “Situations like this call for the use of one’s head.” She kicked the door as hard as she could.

“That wasn’t your head!”

“Bah! It’s harder than I expected.” Power felt dizzy. She’d had to make the blood umbrella massive to shield herself from the acid storm, and she was starting to feel anemic. The acid ate the umbrella away faster than she could absorb the devil’s blood to replenish it.

Kenzo held his head in his hands. “Dammit! That monster’s gonna eat every last one of us!”

Power looked suddenly thoughtful. “Hm.”

“What now?”

“Where’s Denji?” Power asked, perhaps unexpectedly given her earlier disregard.

“What do you mean?” Kenzo sputtered. “He’s gone. I’m sure he got digested with the rest of the hunters.”

“What happens to things that get digested?”

“They probably flow out the door to the back hallway—the intestines. So?” Kenzo was still baffled by this line of inquiry.

Power was quiet for a moment, listening. Amidst the roar of the acid and the howling of the house, she thought she could detect another sound. “When did you last see Denji?”

“Just before I went to wake you up. He was tied up and asleep.”

“He could still be in the intestines!”

“Yeah, but how does that help us?”

B-b-brrm.

Power studied the undulating floor of the rec room. It was trying to draw them to the back of the house, deep into the digestive system. The blood that had flooded from the devil’s heart was being sluiced in the same direction, into the twisting corridor.

B ... b ... brr ... bmm ...

There was a noise like the groaning of a monster from the depths of hell.

“What the hell is that sound?” said Kenzo, looking around the room frantically.

If the house had swallowed Denji and shuffled him into its intestines ... at that moment, he was being deluged with devil blood.

Brrrm! Brmbrmbmbrm!

“It’s getting closer ...” Kenzo said.

Bmbrmbmbrrrm brm brm bzzzzzz!

“Something’s coming!”

Bz bzz bzz screeeeeeeechhhhh creakcreakbzzzzz!

Kenzo clapped his hands over his ears, his eyes screwed shut, but Power watched the entrance of the hall like a cat. “C’mon, partner!” she shouted. “Hurry up!” An instant later, the door exploded into splinters. Standing in the doorway was a bizarre figure. Steel chainsaws extended from its head and arms. Their teeth, sharp and bloody as the teeth of some wild animal, spun at dizzying speed. The sound of motors rent the air loudly enough to turn a human brain to mush.

“What the hell is that thing?” Kenzo cried, his hands still over his ears.

The chainsaw man turned slowly toward them. Amidst the pulsating walls and shower of acid, he looked like he’d stepped out of hell. But all he said was, “Buh? Whaz goin’ on? I just woke up like this ...”

“Denji!” shouted Power. “This way!”

Kenzo was stunned. “That’s the guy from Public Safety? What in God’s name is going on at that place?”

“Screw you, Power! I ain’t forgotten how you threw me under the bus! Real nice!” Denji charged at her, only to be pelted with acid rain. “Ugh! Ow! What is this stuff?”

The acid burned his skin, but Denji’s chainsaw body drew blood from the floor and kept coming. In moments, his right blade was at Power’s neck. “You’re not gonna talk your way outta this one, Power!”

“Bring it up after we escape! We’re about to get eaten!” Power dismissed his threat.

“Say what?” Denji seemed to notice the scene around him for the first time. “Dammit, okay! What do you suggest we do?”

Power explained, “We need to get out of here, but the door won’t open.”

“What, this door? No problem. You just gotta use your head!” Denji ran at the door with his head lowered, driving the saw protruding from his skull straight through it.

“That’s still not what that phrase means!” Kenzo said as he followed Denji and Power out of the rec room.

Iron doors sprouted from the floor and ceiling, blocking their path. “Outta my way!” yelled Denji, slicing through one door after another as they made their way up the heaving hallway.

From behind them came a disgusting *schlorp*. Kenzo, bringing up the rear, looked back. “The acid’s coming after us!” A wave of acid rolled out of the rec room like the ultimate case of acid reflux. “Run! Run! *Run!*” Kenzo shouted.

They made it to the entry hall, but when Denji drove his chainsaws into the front door, they stuck fast. “Guh?” he exclaimed.

“We’re in trouble!” said Kenzo. “If this room is the house’s head, the front door is the mouth! It’ll be as strong as a jawbone!”

“The mouth, huh?” Denji wrenched his arm saws free. Smaller saws sprouted from his feet, allowing him to scramble up the wall. “Guess that makes these windows up here its eyes! And those aren’t tough at all!”

“Now *that’s* using your head!” said Kenzo.

Suspended by his feet, some fifteen feet above the front door, Denji smashed through the two picture windows. A vast, inhuman scream tore through the house. The front door split open vertically, like a screaming mouth. Power and Kenzo leapt through.

“We’re outside!” Power cried. The dark sky was edged with pale light. It was nearly dawn.

Denji vaulted through one of the broken windows and landed on the ground, saws roaring. “Powerrrr!”

“Oh, don’t get so upset,” Power said. “As an apology, I might see my way to letting you squeeze my boob. One boob, one squeeze.”

“Uh ...” Denji said and briefly paused, then shook his head vigorously. “Forget it, Power! I’m holding out for Ms. Maki—*arrgh!*” An iron stake shot out of the doorway and pierced Denji’s chest. In a final burst of malice, the House Devil dragged Denji back into its depths. As Denji screamed and struggled, the house swallowed him.

“Hey ...” Kenzo stared in shock. “Your friend just got eaten.”

“So he did,” said Power. She and Kenzo could only stand and watch helplessly.

Its strength finally spent, the devil house let out a howl that echoed across the mountains. Then it began to fall apart, its exterior peeling away in gruesome, flesh-like chunks. By the time the pale light of morning filled the sky, there was nothing left but a vine-choked ruin.

“A devil possessed an old house and took on its appearance?”

“Apparently so. I thought the client who came to us looked suspicious, so I questioned him. It turned out the House Devil was forcing him to seek out victims to feed it.”

Over the crest of the mountain, chatting amicably, came Aki and Makima.

Power’s shoulders twitched. “Ma—”

“Surely you didn’t need to come all the way here yourself, ma’am,” said Aki.

Makima responded casually. “Well, with so many devils targeting Denji lately, I thought better safe than sorry. And I’ll be on a business trip to Kyoto next week. Why not enjoy a nature hike first? Or would you rather be out here solo?”

Aki waved his hands frantically. “No, not at all!”

Makima approached the ruin. “Oh, it’s Power,” she said calmly. “After the trouble I went to, it looks like you’ve got things under control after all.”

“Uh ... yes! I, the great Detective Power, cracked this case like an egg!”

Beside her, Kenzo snarled. “Was that before or after you tried to kill me?”

“How dare you pin false accusations on me? After I saved your ungrateful life! Foolish dog!”

“Why, you ...” Kenzo growled.

Aki lit a cigarette. “Give it up. She only remembers whatever’s convenient for her. So where’s Denji?”

“My assistant Denji was eaten by the house, I’m afraid,” Power said brightly. “A beautiful and noble end it was!”

“You can’t be serious,” Aki said.

Makima’s eyes lit up with curiosity. “Do you think you could tell me a little more about what happened?”

With many an animated gesture, Power launched into a tale. “He was dissolved in the house’s stomach! Whereupon I tamed the awful beast with my boldness and daring! You see, the great Detective Power ...”

When it became clear that her testimony wasn’t about to clarify anything, Kenzo stepped in and explained what had happened. After he finished, Makima only said, “Hmm.” She turned and walked to the back of the house. The others followed, puzzled.

Near the service entrance they found a messy pile of skeletons—and Denji, the right side of his body eaten away with acid.

“Ms. Makima!” he exclaimed. He waved cheerfully with his still-intact left hand.

Makima knelt down next to him. “Nice work, Denji. Looks like you handled this job capably.”

“You bet I did! I fixed everything for you on the double, no prob!” He flashed a peace sign.

“It’s hard to take that appraisal seriously when half your body is melted away,” Aki said. “How did you get out here?”

Makima brushed her bangs out of her eyes. “The recreation room was the stomach and the corridor beyond it was the intestinal tract, yes? It’s only logical that digested humans pass through the corridor and out the other side.”

“The back door is the *butthole*?” Power burst out laughing. “Ga ha ha ha! That makes you shit, Denji! Ca-ca! Crap! Poop! Henceforth, you shall be known as Poop, assistant to the great Detective Power!”

“Shut up! I bet Detective Magician doesn’t have a potty mouth!”

A short distance away, Kenzo stood watching them—the madwoman who lied through her teeth at a moment’s notice, the half-digested chainsaw creature bickering with her, and the two other agents chatting with them as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Under his breath, he muttered, “Thank God I didn’t make it into Public Safety.” Then he shuffled away from the scene, the morning air still ringing with Denji’s imprecations and Power’s cackling laughter.



NINE YEARS' SAVOR

“One inch into the future is darkness.”

It was an old proverb. Because *darkness* sounded sinister, people often used it to suggest a foul fate lurking ahead, but originally it meant that the future was unknown—whether good or bad, no one could say. But in this line of work, Kishibe thought, the negative interpretation was the more accurate one.

Being a Public Safety Devil Hunter meant living with the constant possibility of death—sudden and without warning. It didn't matter if you were a rookie with a future or a hardened veteran; at any moment, you could drop out of the world of the living like stumbling into a hole. It could happen to anyone. Kishibe had spent his years on the front lines of devil extermination dodging such plunges into the abyss. Was his longevity a blessing from God, a run of good fortune? Or did it mean he was so lost even the Grim Reaper had forsaken him?

Kishibe chuckled bleakly to himself. There was no God, and no Reaper either. All Kishibe could count on were his ever-present companions—booze, tobacco, and devils. And his poker-faced partner.

The notes of a jazz piano drifted languorously through a haze of ambient lighting. He was in a bar on the top floor of a high-class hotel. The lights of the city below seemed impossibly distant; before him was a dark sky broken by the cold silhouettes of high-rises.

Kishibe gazed out at the darkness that seemed so close. His reflection showed a clean-shaven face. A jagged scar from an old wound. Hair worn long and

unadorned. “How long we been together, Quanxi? Almost nine years already?”

The woman beside him sipped her wine. “Nine years. Is it really?” She was beautiful, after a fashion, but her face was unsettlingly impassive, and she spoke without emotion. A patch covered her right eye.

Kishibe raised his own glass. “How about it? Ready to go out with me yet?”

A flash of motion. “Never.”

“Now, now, don’t hit me. We’re indoors, remember?”

Quanxi gave him a long stare before lowering her fist. Kishibe had been working on her since the day they’d met, but the answer was always *never, no way, not in this lifetime, get over yourself*—and her rejections were usually accompanied by a flurry of punches.

“Still not giving up after all these years,” she said. “It’s almost impressive.”

“Just goes to show the depths of my feelings for—hey, pay attention!”
Quanxi’s gaze had wandered after one of the waitresses.

When Quanxi continued to ignore him, he shrugged and tossed back the rest of his drink. Only then did Quanxi turn back. “The stink of booze on you is worse than usual. How much did you put away before I got here?”

“Not a lot.”

“Oh, really? I know a rookie was killed in the line of duty yesterday. Whenever one of your newbies bites it, you always order an extra round or four.”

Kishibe’s only response was to order another whiskey on the rocks. He studied the amber liquid in the glass, his expression vacant. “Twelve-year-old Macallan. Whiskey takes time to mature, you know. It’s gotta sit in the barrel until it’s good and ready.”

“Do you have a point?”

“At Public Safety, most folks get one year. I’ve had hunters I thought had it in ’em, others I thought didn’t, but within a year they all died or fled back to the civilian sector. That’s why I don’t call myself a teacher. Far as I’m concerned, I’m just training dogs. But even dogs ... you get attached to ’em.”

Quanxi said nothing.

“Five hunters were killed last month. One month alone. So I went to the brass and said, don’t give me people, don’t even give me dogs. Just give me toys that won’t break.”

“Toys that won’t break, eh?”

“Yeah. I get fond of a kid, they turn up dead, next thing you know I’m ordering that extra round. I’m better off when I’m working with material I can’t get attached to.” Kishibe let out a sigh of hot breath and brought the whiskey to his lips again. “They told me there’s nobody who can’t break. No guarantees.”

“They’re right.”

“So they ain’t giving me any rookies for a while.”

Quanxi had a response for that. “Sounds like a fair compromise. You drink too much anyway.”

“What, you’re worried about me?”

“I’m worried about having to bail you out the next time you go on a bender.” Quanxi looked into her glass of wine, still mostly full. The reflection of her own face, blood-red and quavering, looked back. “Come to think of it, I’m supposed to be getting a rookie of my own.”

“You?”

“Yeah. Someone asked for me by name. Said they absolutely had to have me as their instructor.”

Kishibe scoffed. “That’s funny. Is it a guy, by any chance?”

“No, a woman. Pretty cute, judging from her file photo.”

“Well, don’t you sound thrilled?”

“Do I?” Quanxi gave him a look of modest confusion.

Kishibe dug into his pocket and pulled out a room key. “You might be interested to know I made reservations at this hotel. What do you say we check out the neighborhood watering holes?”

“I’ll be your drinking partner for one round, Kishibe. Dragging you out from

under barstools is above my pay grade.” Quanxi drained her glass in a single long swig, put a bill on the counter, and stood up. They’d faced death together more than once, but she never dropped her curtness.

The corner of Kishibe’s mouth crooked up. “Take a partner ... age for nine years. Huh.” He turned the glass contemplatively in his hand, listening to the clink of the shifting ice.

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Two days later, Kishibe and Quanxi were side by side again, this time meeting the new devil hunter.

“Good morning!” the rookie chirped. “I’m Minami Nakano, and I’m so thrilled to be working with you!” She was a small, baby-faced girl in a dark pixie haircut. Her irrepressible energy and big round eyes gave the impression of a puppy in human form. “Ms. Quanxi, it’s such an honor to have you teaching me!” She grabbed Quanxi’s hand and shook vigorously. Quanxi gazed dispassionately at the shaken hand.

Kishibe gave a casual wave. “Hey there, Nakano. I’m Kishibe, Quanxi’s partner.”

“It’s been much too long, Mr. Kishibe!” the new recruit bubbled.

“Uh ... Have we met somewhere?”

“Oh! Er, not personally. I saw you at the new-hires welcome party. At a distance. I remember you because when you introduced yourself, you said, ‘I like booze, women, and killing devils,’ and I thought that was so funny! It just stuck with me.”

“Ahh ...” Kishibe said. “Well, sorry to disappoint. You *are* disappointed, right? Meeting me?”

“Ha ha! I know you were saying all that to break the ice! That’s real leadership!”

Faced with the young woman’s indefatigable positivity, Kishibe could only scratch his cheek awkwardly. He jerked a thumb at Quanxi. “Why’d you want

this gal as your teacher? There are full-fledged members of Public Safety who are scared to get anywhere near her.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous, but I’m not scared. Maybe ... *reverent* is the right word? Ms. Quanxi is so strong and so beautiful!”

“Ah, reverence. Of course.” Kishibe stole a glance at Quanxi.

After a long pause, Quanxi spoke. “Minami Nakano, you said?” She seemed to want to be sure she had the name right.

“Yes, ma’am! You can call me Minami.”

“All right, Minami,” Quanxi continued. “Which devils are you contracted with?”

“None yet. I thought I ought to get in some training first so I know what I’m in for.”

“Not a bad idea.” Quanxi nodded curtly. “Hunters who try to skate by on devil powers rather than their own merits rarely last long. We should start by honing your basic martial arts skills.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Quanxi followed up with more questions. “You’re confident in your stamina? Your physical strength?”

“Not, er, really ... But I’m full of can-do attitude!”

Quanxi nodded and gestured for Minami to follow her. “All right, let’s see what you’re capable of. Come down to the training room.”

“I’m right behind you, Ms. Quanxi!”

The two headed for the Public Safety training room, Kishibe sidling along behind them. Quanxi allowed Minami to rush ahead, then shot Kishibe a glare. “I don’t recall including you in that invitation.”

“Just happen to have a little free time on my hands.”

“Then go smoke or drink or crash at some woman’s place, like you always do.”

“So cold! You know you’re the only woman for me—” He was cut off by Quanxi’s fist, which he narrowly dodged. He could hear the whistle of the air as

it went by his ear. It would have killed a man with slower reflexes, but after nine years Kishibe had learned to be quick on his feet. He got to a safe distance and held up his hands. “Orders from the top. I was told to keep an eye on my partner.”

“Mad Dog Kishibe, meekly following orders? Don’t make me laugh,” Quanxi said with a straight face. “I’ll handle the training on my own.”

“Suit yourself. Like I told you, I don’t want to train any more dogs for a while,” Kishibe said. “It’s not the girl the brass wants eyes on, though. It’s you.”

Quanxi had trained a few rookies in the past. Thanks to the brutality of her training, every last one had put in for early retirement.

“Fine,” said Quanxi, but she didn’t sound happy. “Do as you please.” She turned her back on Kishibe and didn’t look at him again.

In the training room, Quanxi instructed Minami to start doing laps around the expansive area. She was fast enough. She would have to be to have passed her initial evaluation into the department. For a Public Safety Devil Hunter, however, basic fitness wouldn’t be enough.

After about a dozen laps, Minami’s breath was coming hard and fast. “Time to stop,” Quanxi said.

“I can k-k-keep g-going,” Minami huffed.

Quanxi crossed her arms. “Don’t push yourself from minute one. It’ll have an adverse effect on the rest of your training.”

“Understood, ma’am.” Minami came to a stop and caught her breath.

Beside Quanxi, Kishibe pulled on a cigarette. “That’s a change of heart.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember that guy who came through here six years back? He threw up eight times and you still kept him running.”

Quanxi responded, “He needed the extra push.”

“You pushed him all the way into an ambulance.”

His quip earned no leniency. “Oh, who can trust the memories of an old

drunk?”

“Which means you know I’m right,” Kishibe pointed out.

Instead of replying, Quanxi stripped off her shirt to reveal a black tank top. “Now we spar. Come at me. Use any moves you like.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Minami looked nervous, but she assumed a fighting stance. Then she cried, “Yaaah!” and charged. Quanxi dodged without the slightest effort and sent Minami tumbling across the floor. “Yikes! Oh!”

“Again.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Minami jumped to her feet and confronted Quanxi a second time. Then a third, then a fourth. No matter how many rounds they went, she was always on the ground in the blink of an eye. At last Minami sat on the floor, breathing hard. “Y-you’re amazing ... I can’t get near you ...”

“Let’s take a short rest,” Quanxi said. “Make sure you hydrate.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Minami darted out of the training room. Quanxi watched her go, her face unreadable.

Kishibe picked up the shirt Quanxi had pulled off. “Okay, what’s going on?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know as well as I do,” Kishibe said, “That sparring match hardly rose to the level of a playground game. Where’s the woman who’d come out on top if the whole world showed up for a fistfight?”

“I wouldn’t go at a rookie with my full strength. What’s the point in tearing her to pieces on her first day?” Quanxi sighed.

Kishibe kept at it. “The way I remember it, a few years back you vaporized a rookie’s ribs with your first punch.”

“Funny, I don’t recall. My memory’s not what it used to be since I started going out drinking with you.”

“Gee, sorry.”

Minami bounced back into the room. “Sorry to keep you waiting! Thanks for your patience.”

Quanxi rubbed her shoulders. “It’s the first day. I’m breaking her in. Don’t worry—I don’t need you to remind me to turn the difficulty up.”

“You gonna try some tight holds next?” Kishibe asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just a feeling.”

Quanxi refuted the claim. “What good would pins and locks do against a devil? You’re an idiot.”

“Sure, I’ll cop to that. Anyway, fine. No pins.” Kishibe shrugged, and Quanxi resumed the sparring match. There was no doubt in Kishibe’s mind—this was nothing like her behavior with the men she’d trained. Far from pushing Minami over the edge, she seemed almost tender toward her. The girl certainly could make a person feel protective. Kishibe had a strong suspicion that Minami was just Quanxi’s type.

Better keep an eye on things for now ...

He half-watched the two women spar. The training room echoed with Minami’s sweet, girlish cries. He took a long drag on his cigarette.

Minami completed training in two weeks. On her last night, the three went out for a drink together. Kishibe sat beside Quanxi, who fixed him with a chilly look, the polar opposite of the *thank-God-the-workday’s-over* smiles on the faces of most of the bars’ patrons.

“Do you have to tag along?” she hissed. “Minami is my student. You’re a third wheel.”

“I’m your partner! Can’t partners get a drink together?” Kishibe scrutinized the menu on the wall before ordering a draft beer. The cold fizz and rich hops cleared his throat while the noise of the bar and the clatter of the kitchen soothed his ears. The reek of tobacco, baked into the walls, flowed through his nasal passages, and his skin was warm from the body heat of the crowd. Working in a trade where death was his one constant companion, Kishibe relied on dives like this to remind him he was still alive.

“Oops, sorry!” Minami flushed. “I invited Mr. Kishibe. It still seems

presumptuous of me to go drinking one-on-one with you, Master Quanxi.”

Quanxi didn’t say a word, only let out the faintest of sighs.

“So how long have you two been partners?” Minami asked.

“You know ... I’ve lost track,” Quanxi said.

“Nine years,” said Kishibe. “Wouldn’t kill you to remember it.”

Minami popped a tomato slice into her mouth. “Nine years! That’s a long time.”

“Yeah, especially in Public Safety.” Kishibe raised his glass and filled his belly with beer.

“Why do you think you’ve lasted together for so long?” Minami asked.

Quanxi shrugged. “It’s just that Kishibe refuses to die.”



“Sheesh, you sound like you *want* me to bite the dust.” Kishibe ordered another beer. They’d been busting each others’ chops for so long it had become second nature.

Minami grinned a little awkwardly. Then she seemed to have a thought. “Will we do it soon?” she asked, her open face clouding with trepidation.

“Do what?” Quanxi asked coolly.

“Exterminate a devil.”

“Oh, that. It won’t be long before you’re called up, I’m sure.” Kishibe snatched up two slices of red snapper sashimi and popped them into his mouth at once.

Standard operating procedure was for a rookie to be accompanied by their training officer on their first devil extermination job. Things had been unusually quiet for the last couple of weeks, but that only meant something was about to give.

“To tell the truth, I’m not sure I can fight a devil,” Minami confessed. “I can’t even handle Ms. Quanxi yet!”

“If a newbie could go toe to toe with Quanxi after two weeks, the rest of us would be out of a job,” Kishibe said.

Minami was bashful. “Well, okay ... but ...”

“In fact, you’re the only one who’s survived two weeks with her,” Kishibe added.

“You mean that?” Minami asked, her voice full of sunshine again.

It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t exactly truthful either. Quanxi’s training methods with Minami were as different from the tack she’d taken with previous rookies as heaven was from hell. No need to explain that to the kid, he told himself.

“Word of advice, though. When you’re a devil hunter, fretting about whether you can hold your own isn’t in the job description. You’re there to do one thing—kill the devil.”

“Okay ...”

“If you’re really worried, get out while you still can,” Kishibe added, offering

more unsolicited advice. “There’s other ways to make a living, you know.”

“I ... I’m not going to quit!” Minami exclaimed, squeezing her chopsticks tightly. Heads turned at nearby tables, and she shrank back apologetically. “Er ... sorry.” She hung her head in embarrassment, but only for a second. Then she snapped back into her usual chipper self. “So, um, do you have any tips? You know, for keeping your cool against a devil.”

Quanxi took a sip of water. “Hit it as hard as you can.”

Minami soberly repeated this sage advice. “Hit it! As hard! As I can!”

Kishibe barked out a laugh. “Some advice. That works for her because she hits like a pile driver. Don’t take it to heart, kid.”

“Then do *you* have advice, Mr. Kishibe?” Minami turned her bright gaze toward him.

“Hmm ...” Kishibe stroked his chin. “Loosen the screws in your head.”

Minami didn’t understand. “The screws ... in my head?”

“Yeah. The saner you are, the more terrifying a devil’s attacks seems, and terror gives a devil strength. So get a few screws loose. Forget about sanity. Even devils fear what they can’t understand.”

“You want me to ... go crazy?” “Hey, inquiring minds wanna know. Why’d you sign up with Public Safety anyway, kid?” Kishibe held out a skewer of grilled chicken like a microphone.

“Well ...” Minami took the skewer, hesitated for a moment, then said, “I was attacked by a devil when I was a schoolkid. A devil hunter saved me. From then on, I wanted to be just like them.”

“Infatuation, huh?” Kishibe summarized. “One of the three most common motivations.”

“What are the other two?” Minami asked.

“A sense of duty and a burning hatred of devils. And in case you’re curious, the next most typical is people with an eye on our plum benefits package.”

Minami hesitated. “Is infatuation ... a bad reason?”

“Not necessarily,” responded Kishibe. “But it’s a sane one.”

Minami didn’t say anything, but her cheeks puffed out in a childish sulk. Kishibe might have hit a little too close to home. She whipped the skewer around like a sword, drawing shapes in the air. “How do I loosen the screws, then?”

“This is what helps me,” Kishibe said, gesturing at his beer.

Quanxi sighed. “Ignore Kishibe. He loves to play the grizzled old guru, but drowning his cares in alcohol has fried his brain. Loose? His screws fell out years ago.”

Kishibe grinned. “See, you get me!”

Quanxi sipped her water. “Just don’t overthink things, Minami. The world being what it is, stupid people live much happier lives. Be simpleminded.”

Kishibe nodded. “You heard the woman. Be crazy and be stupid.”

“Don’t act like your advice is equal to mine, you drunk,” Quanxi quipped.

Once again Minami was quiet. She munched on the chicken as she listened to the two snipe at each other. Then, without warning, she sprang up and drained Kishibe’s beer in a single long chug.

“Whoa, hey!” he shouted, but before he could stop her the drink was down her throat, *glug glug glug*. She slammed the empty mug on the table.

“Mr. Kishibe, I’m n-not much of a drinker, but maybe that will help loosen ... my ...” That was as far as Minami got before she crumpled to the ground.

Neon signs slipped by in the night. Kishibe watched them speed past the taxi window. From the back seat, Quanxi said irritably, “Kishibe, can you guess what I’m thinking right now?” Minami, her head resting on Quanxi’s knees, snored.

Kishibe didn’t take his eyes off the window. “Nope. No idea.”

“We’ve been friends this long and you don’t know?”

“What do you take me for?” Kishibe looked back. “Of course I know. You’re finally coming around to the idea of going out with me.”

Quanxi wasn’t having it. “If I didn’t have Minami on my lap I’d reach up there,

pull your head off, and throw it out the window.”

“The scary part is that you’re not joking.”

“Here’s what I’m thinking—I’m in a taxi taking *Minami* home, so what the hell are *you* doing here?” Her voice was soft and even but edged with danger.

Kishibe leaned back in his seat. His eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. “It’s partly my fault that Minami got herself blackout drunk.”

“You were screwing around with my pupil,” Quanxi accused. “What was all that talk about sanity? Are you trying to convince her she’s not cut out for this work?”

“As things stand, I’d say she has six months, tops, before she buys the farm,” Kishibe reasoned. “And you know it.”

Quanxi went silent.

Granted, that huge swig had caught him by surprise, but otherwise Minami was as straight an arrow as they came. She wasn’t physically capable enough to survive on strength alone, and Kishibe doubted whether she had the guts to make a contract with a powerful devil. She was a textbook example of the kind of recruit destined for a short career in Public Safety. For some reason, every year there was a crop of rookies just like her.

Quanxi ran a hand through Minami’s hair as the girl snoozed peacefully on her knees. “I’m not going to let her die.”

Kishibe mustered faux approval. “Well, that’s encouraging. What if she isn’t posted under you?”

“You’re awfully chatty tonight,” Quanxi pointed out, not as if it were a good thing. “I thought you were getting out of dog training for a while.”

“I thought I was too. But I hate to see a partner’s pet pooch go down.”

Again Quanxi was quiet.

“Your turn, Quanxi. What am I thinking right now?”

“Don’t know. Don’t want to know.”

“You’ve been my partner this long and that’s all you have to say? You’re

gonna make me cry, here.”

Quanxi scoffed. “You ran out of tears years ago.”

The ghost of a smile crossed Kishibe’s face. The longer you were a devil hunter with Public Safety, the more bodies piled up around you. The pros who’d trained you bit the dust. Your peers bought it. The kids who came after you disappeared into the meat grinder. The dogs you raised kept dying dogs’ deaths.

And all the while, you gave away little pieces of your humanity in contracts with your devils. Until all that was left was ... what? Kishibe wondered sometimes. Those were the nights he’d arm himself with enough liquor to take a bath in and drink until he didn’t wonder about anything anymore.

Maybe his philosophy of life wasn’t so different from Quanxi’s. Crazy or ignorant, what was the difference?

Kishibe took a flask out of his pocket to wet his throat. “What I’m thinking is— How do you know where Minami lives?” It was Quanxi, rather than the plastered Minami, who had given the driver the address.

“I told you I’d read her file.”

“Memorized her info, huh?”

“What are you implying?”

“Nothing in particular.” It seemed Quanxi was even more smitten with Minami than Kishibe had realized.

The taxi purred along for another twenty tense, silent minutes before stopping at a low-rise apartment building. Quanxi hefted Minami onto her back and hauled her to her room. The door fell open with a rusty shriek.

“It was unlocked?” said Kishibe. “What a trusting girl.”

“Only criminals have criminal thoughts,” Quanxi replied. “Like you.” She flipped on the lights. Kishibe found himself in a one-bedroom studio. The décor was limited to a table holding a potted cactus and a photo of Minami with what looked like her family. Without a word, Kishibe turned the photo face-down. Nothing good came of knowing too much about your dogs.

Quanxi laid Minami on the bed and turned to him. "I can look after her. It's time for *you* to go home."

"And I personally would love to, but *your partner* isn't sure that's the right call."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ever heard of a wolf in sheep's clothing? Or maybe a wolf in wolf's clothing."

"What are you implying?"

Kishibe coughed. Even if Quanxi was interested in Minami, she wouldn't go so low as to jump a rookie ...

But that was exactly what he couldn't assume. To survive as a devil hunter with Public Safety as long as Quanxi had, you had to sever all ties to common sense and ordinary decency. Kishibe knew the same was true of himself. He was just trying to decide how to broach the issue when Minami groaned.

"Ngh ... ah ... Huh? Where ..." Her eyes fluttered open. After a moment of confusion, she recognized her surroundings. She looked mortified. "I'm so sorry! I must've caused you so much trouble!"

Quanxi sat on the bed and spoke softly. "Don't worry about it. It's Kishibe's fault. You should take a shower, rinse off."

"Thanks. I'll do that." Minami swayed as she got to her feet.

"You're not steady. Let me help you," Quanxi said.

"You can just stop right there," said Kishibe, catching Quanxi's arm before she could follow Minami into the bathroom.

Quanxi narrowed her eyes at him. "Why'd you stop me?"

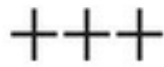
"Just a hunch."

"I know why I wouldn't want *you* helping Minami into the shower, but what's the problem with me doing it?" Quanxi asked.

Kishibe shrugged. "Might not be one. Then again, there might be."

"Before we take this one step further, let go of my arm." Quanxi was just shaking free of him when Kishibe's phone rang.

He listened for a second, then replied simply, “Right,” before pocketing the phone again. “Got a devil on the loose. We’re up.”



The site was an old factory in a desolate stretch of town. It looked like it had been abandoned for years. Half of the building had collapsed, leaving a few battered slate walls shining with mildew in the moonlight. A fetid wind rustled through the weeds choking the area.

“W-what kind of devil do you think it is?” Minami asked. She gulped. The lack of focus in her large eyes wasn’t from alcohol anymore, but a potent combination of nerves and fear.

“Initial report came from some kids who went in there on a dare, but they said it was too dark to see much,” said Kishibe, scanning the area. “They claimed they heard a voice that couldn’t be human.”

“W-well! This is an opportunity to show you what I can do!” Minami’s voice quavered as she squeezed the hilt of the sword at her hip.

Quanxi clapped her gently on the shoulder. “Loosen up. Tonight, you can hang back.”

Minami protested. “But—”

Kishibe pulled the flask of whiskey from his pocket and held it out to her. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Want a little liquid courage?”

“N-no thank you ...” she replied hesitantly.

“Don’t joke around, Kishibe,” Quanxi admonished. “You’ll kill her with alcohol poisoning before the devil shows up.”

“Just trying to lighten the mood.” He shrugged and took a swig. “Okay, Minami. What’s the most important thing for a rookie on her first devil hunt?”

Minami gave her best answer. “Um ... make sure to take the devil down?”

“Naw. Don’t die.”

Minami was speechless.

“It’s easy to panic the first time you see a devil,” Kishibe went on. “You freeze with fear. Tense up. Forget every move you learned in training. But as long as you don’t die, there’ll be a next time.”

“A next time ...” Minami repeated. In other words, there was a chance there *wouldn’t* be a next time. She nodded solemnly as that simple fact finally sank in.

They climbed through a doorway slanted at a wild angle and arrived in an open space that must have once been the factory floor. Only fragments of a roof remained overhead, letting the moonlight in to shine on the exposed steel girders of the walls. And something else, something human-shaped ...

All three hunters gasped.

Abandoned mannequins littered the floor like fish after the catch of a lifetime. The piles of lifeless bodies extended as far as they could see. Some had no arms, others no legs. Some were headless. All were covered in grime and dust, unsettlingly close to human, uttering voiceless screams in the moonlight.

“A mannequin factory?” Minami said. “Th-this is where the devil decided to make its home?” She took a trembling step forward and glanced around. Almost imperceptibly, a shadow quivered at her feet. One of the mannequins was reaching out to grab the rookie devil hunter’s ankle.

By the time Kishibe opened his mouth to warn her, Quanxi was already shouting. “Minami, beneath you!”

Minami yelped as the plastic fingers brushed her toes. She tore her sword from its scabbard and drove it downward. The weapon plunged into the mannequin’s shoulder and cracked its chest in two. The sound of the blade scraping the floor echoed wildly in the otherwise silent space. The mannequin crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut.

Minami turned to Kishibe and Quanxi and leapt joyfully into the air. “I ... I did it! I really did it!”

The mannequin flopped over on its back. Kishibe saw with horror that it didn’t look like a mannequin anymore. The cracked plastic had become smooth skin, the blank face now had damp eyes that blinked at him, and there was close-cropped dark hair on the formerly bald head.

Aside from its severed arm, the mannequin was the spitting image of Minami Nakano.

“Eek!” Minami yelped. She stumbled back and landed flat on her behind. In a sudden burst of power, the Minami mannequin was flung violently away and shattered to pieces.

Quanxi stood with her fist clenched, cool and unmoved. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Minami allowed Quanxi to pull her to her feet. She wobbled slightly. “Um ... does this mean we beat it?”

“That’s how you defeat a devil, Minami,” Quanxi answered.

Minami wasn’t certain of the explanation. “Um ... how?”

“By pounding it relentlessly,” Quanxi helpfully clarified.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You moved so fast, I don’t think she saw your punch, Quanxi,” said Kishibe, glancing at the graceful arc of his partner’s back before turning his attention to the fragments of the mannequin. “So it was the Mannequin Devil ... or maybe the Transformation Devil.” The mannequin had only changed shape after Minami attacked it. Based on the scant information he had so far, it seemed this devil could take the form of anyone who touched it.

Kishibe stood silently for a moment, then dropped into a defensive stance.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Kishibe?” Minami asked.

He scanned their surroundings before answering. Call it instinct. “If it really went down after one punch from Quanxi, great. But what if that wasn’t all?”

“You think there’s more of them?” the novice asked.

“Dunno. If you hunt devils, though, one thing should be second nature—it never hurts to assume a worst-case scenario. Not when a single mistake can mean game over. There are no mulligans in this line of work.”

Minami went quiet too. What if this wasn’t over?

Kishibe’s instincts, honed by years of experience as a devil hunter, picked up an inhuman malevolence filling the space like tobacco smoke. At least, he

thought they did.

Quanxi crossed her arms over her head and cracked her shoulder joints. “You’ll only lose more hair worrying like this.”

“I’m not losing my hair. Not all of us can get by on brute strength, y’know. Gotta exercise this booze-soaked brain once in a while.”

Kishibe thought through the possibilities. The devil was able to possess and control the mannequins. By the time Quanxi had smashed its host, it could have fled to one of countless others. It could also make a mannequin look like a person who touched it. Kishibe had heard rumors of an assassin who turned humans into puppets; this devil was the opposite, making puppets into humans.

“Big deal,” Kishibe mumbled. If all it did was copy someone’s appearance, he could handle it. There were worse scenarios. Such as—

His thoughts were interrupted by an icy chill running down his spine. One of the largest piles of mannequins stirred. The blank-faced figures jumped to their feet and parted to reveal a dark shape charging forward.

“Hngh!”

Closing. Impact. Shock.

Kishibe raised his arms over his head just in time, deflecting the attacker’s fist. The blow was fast, strong, and heavy.

Through his crossed arms, he made out the shifting face of his foe. An eye patch appeared over its right eye.

The worst possible scenario, then.

Quanxi had touched the mannequin when she destroyed it, and the devil could turn into anyone who touched it. What Kishibe had feared was that the doppelganger could steal not just the appearance, but the abilities of its model. And this one looked exactly like his partner.

Kishibe felt his bones creaking as the Quanxi mannequin fought with him, driving him back into a tangle of reinforced steel along the wall.

“Mr. Kishibe!” Minami cried. She turned to her instructor, panicked.

Quanxi slowly uncrossed her arms. Her body tensed. But all she said was, “For once that old worrywart was right.”

“Is Mr. Kishibe going to be okay?!” asked Minami. She took a step toward the forest of steel bars.

No sooner had she moved than Kishibe emerged from the darkness, unsteady but still on his feet. “Whew. It surprised me, but I managed to take it.”

“Thank goodness!” Minami breathed a sigh of relief and jogged up to him.

Quanxi’s shout came a half-beat too late. “Wait, Minami! Don’t go near that thing!”

“What?”

Then two things happened at once. Kishibe drove a knife into Minami’s gut, and Quanxi rushed up and punched him in the face.

The devil could transform a mannequin into the likeness of anyone who had touched it, and Quanxi knew Kishibe had touched her look-alike.

Minami saw the thing with Kishibe’s face turn back into a mannequin and shatter. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. She could feel her consciousness ebbing away.

“Yow,” the real Kishibe grunted. He held a hand to his hip as he pulled himself up by the wall. A headless mannequin lay nearby. Lucky for him, his foe hadn’t been able to copy Quanxi’s abilities perfectly. That would be impossible, he thought with grim humor. It had literally been a pale imitation.

Even an imperfect copy of Quanxi’s power was tough to tangle with, but Kishibe had found enough of an opening to tear off the Quanxi-thing’s head.

So it wasn’t the worst worst-case scenario, he thought. But it wasn’t good. The devil was sure to have fled to another body in its nearly inexhaustible supply of backups.

He emerged from the tangle of steel and saw at once that something was wrong. Quanxi was kneeling in the middle of the factory floor, clutching an unconscious Minami. Kishibe hurried up to them. “She breathing?”

“Yes, but ... I was lax.”

Blood glistened on Minami's abdomen. Not enough to be immediately fatal. Quanxi must have stopped the attacker before it could stab any deeper. It looked like Minami had passed out from the shock more than the injury. But Kishibe sensed this was cold comfort to his partner.

The factory echoed with maniacal laughter, bouncing from one direction then another. *Ah ha ha. Ah ha ha. Ah ha ha.*

"We got her. We got her!"

"The girl was so trusting. Simple to deceive."

The devil was jumping from mannequin to mannequin, mocking them. The taunts came from every direction until they swirled into a hideous miasma of noise.

"Humans fear us!"

"They say it's our blank faces."

"Such fun! But we want to change."

"We *can* change."

"So we shall! Let's change into the people who touch us!"

"Take their faces. Take their thoughts."

Kishibe's brow furrowed. "You can read people's minds?"

"The one-eyed woman. The unshaven man. Strong. Something wrong in their heads. Hard to tell what they're thinking."

"But the other one, the young woman. Weak. Earnest. Easy to read." One of the mannequins pointed at Minami where she lay in Quanxi's arms, then turned slowly to point at Kishibe. "She's in love with the unshaven man."

"I'm sorry—what?" Kishibe burst out.

The mannequins ignored him and chattered on. "She was attacked by a devil once. The unshaven man saved her. Love at first sight."

"She wanted to see him again. Couldn't sleep. Decided to join Public Safety. Worked very hard. Got in."

“She wanted to be assigned to him. But what a shame! He’s not taking on students.”

“Decided to ask for the one-eyed woman instead.”

“Partners. They are partners. She will see much of her savior, the unshaven man.”

“She lets her guard down before him. She will be easy to deceive. She was easy to deceive.”

“Loyal. Earnest. Easy to read. Easy to kill.”

Kishibe found himself struck dumb. Minami had joined Public Safety because she’d been saved ... by *him*? He’d had no idea. He’d fought too many devils to remember every person he had rescued. It would’ve been a challenge even if he hadn’t spent the years killing his memories with alcohol.

But Minami had said it when they’d met, hadn’t she? That it had “been much too long.”

The revelation stopped Kishibe in his tracks, if only for a brief moment. Quanxi had feelings for Minami, but Minami had feelings for him. And he’d spent all his time with them trying to get in Quanxi’s pants. A perfect love triangle. No ... a perfect failure to communicate.

Kishibe locked eyes with Quanxi. Something impossible to describe passed between them.

“Well, well,” he said. “You gotta laugh, huh?”

Quanxi gently set Minami on the ruined floor. Minami groaned and her eyes fluttered open. She was coming around. Just as well she’d missed hearing her deepest secrets laid bare.

Around them, the chattering grew angry.

“Ahh, we failed to kill her. Better fix that.”

“Time to end this. Yes, let’s end it.”

“The one-eyed woman. Her body is strange. Hard to use.”

“Let’s use the unshaven man, then. Let’s do that.”

“All of us together.”

“All of us at once.”

“You sickos,” Kishibe grunted.

All the mannequins, heaped across the factory floor, began to tremble. There were so many. How many could the devil possess at once? The shivering dummies began to sprout black hair and stubble. In moments, each of them was Kishibe’s spitting image. They even bore the scar at his mouth.

In unison, they began to stagger to their feet. Kishibe discovered he didn’t enjoy seeing hundreds and hundreds of himself shambling toward him.

“Die.”

“You must die.”

“All of you die die die ...”

Even the mannequins’ voices sounded like his as their chant rose to a roar. The noise jerked Minami to full consciousness. She screamed at the sight of her own blood and the mob of Kishibe-things closing in on them.

Die die die die die die die die die ...

Countless Kishibes intoned the word like a curse as they advanced on the devil hunters. The aura of malice, of murder, was audible; it sounded like insects hissing.

“This is a nightmare,” Quanxi said, affectless as ever. “One of you is bad enough.”

“Gimme a break,” said Kishibe.

Quanxi sank to a crouch and put a hand on the hilt of her sword. A chuckle arose from the mob.

“She would fight?”

“It’s futile.”

“One-eyed woman strong. Still doomed.”

“There are so many of us.”

“There are too many of us.”

“If.”

“Just if.”

“You could defeat all of us.”

“Would you dare?”

“What if you kill the wrong one? The real one?”

Good question, Kishibe thought. The factory was crawling with his doppelgangers. If Quanxi started indiscriminately attacking every Kishibe in the place, it would be all too easy for him to join the pile of bodies. She wouldn't take that risk.

No, that was a deeply mistaken assumption, Kishibe knew. Of course she would. In the time he'd spared on the thought, she'd already drawn her sword and vanished from his side.

A dark shadow slashed across the factory, not even sound giving it away. The only sign of Quanxi's movements was a series of dark footprints, barely noticeable, across the floors and walls. Sound followed only after, amid the tempest of wind that slammed into everyone and everything in the vicinity.

The contest was settled with the first move. Dozens of heads flew into the air, each one bearing Kishibe's face. The decapitated mannequins stood dumbly, as if not even realizing they'd been beheaded, before crumpling belatedly to the ground. The only ones left standing were Quanxi and the real Kishibe.

Kishibe heaved a sigh and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“But ... how?” The voice came from a louse-like creature pinched between Quanxi's finger and thumb. On closer inspection, it looked like a tiny, battered doll lashed together from black feathers. The devil's true form. “How ... you find ... me?”

“I didn't look. I simply killed everything else,” Quanxi stated.

“Cannot ... believe,” said the devil.

“You'd better,” Kishibe said. “That's how my partner rolls.” He stretched,

bones cracking, then looked at the knife in his hand. A jagged crack ran through the blade. It had held just long enough to deflect her attack.

He'd known Quanxi would try to kill him. Nine years had taught him so. From the moment her switch flipped, there was nothing he could do but try to protect himself.

"If that was enough to kill you, you wouldn't have lasted nine years with me," said Quanxi, the detachment in her voice softening for a moment. She crushed the devil between her fingers. Its death rattle was no louder than a mosquito's. The battle concluded with a long, empty silence.

"Can you stand, Minami?" Quanxi asked. Minami was still crouched on the floor, not making a sound. Quanxi reached down to help her up, but her fingers grasped empty air. She let her hand fall back to her side. "Kishibe, get Minami to a hospital."

"Sure thing."

"And buy her a new lock for her door."

"Wasn't me who broke the first one." Kishibe helped Minami to her feet and leaned her against his shoulder.

Minami started to stammer an apology. "Uh ... I ..." "It's just a little blood loss. It won't kill you. Gotta get you to an ER, though." Kishibe spotted the slim silhouette of his partner making a silent exit. "Hey, Quanxi."

"What is it?" she asked.

"You knew which one was the real me, didn't you?" Kishibe said.

Quanxi didn't answer right away. Kishibe waited. He knew she'd meant to kill every Kishibe in the room, but he couldn't shake the sense that she'd gone just a tiny bit easy on him. He'd been ready to lose an arm, but he'd walked away with only a cracked knife.

Finally she spared him a contemptuous glance. "When that devil comes back from Hell, tell it that if it wants to pass itself off as you, it needs to get that stink of alcohol on its breath."

Then, step by weary step, Quanxi slowly disappeared into the darkness

outside.

“So ... she knew?” Minami said.

“Yeah,” Kishibe nodded. “And she still nearly murdered me.” She was the craziest partner a guy could have, by a long shot. Maybe she’d had to let out her frustration after learning that her pet student was more attached to Kishibe. Made sense to him.

“I’ll never live up to her.” Minami sounded pained from more than just her injuries.

“Hardly anyone can, kid. She’s a stone-cold killer.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Her hand wasn’t on her wounded abdomen, but her chest. “I was fooled by one mannequin that looked like you. But Quanxi ... she picked the real you out of hundreds.”

This time it was Kishibe’s turn to be silent. Minami’s admission of this small defeat drifted away into the moonlight, and then it was gone.

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“Minami quit Public Safety,” Quanxi said quietly. It was three days later, and they were back at the swanky hotel bar.

Kishibe gazed at the night spread before them outside the window. “Smart choice. She would’ve been dead in a hurry. And I don’t need any more reasons to drink.”

Quanxi fondled the stem of her wine glass before speaking. “Minami was interested in you. Weren’t you tempted to pursue that?”

“Not when I’ve already got you in my heart— Whoa! No hitting,” Kishibe saw the punch coming.

Quanxi reluctantly lowered her fist. “Can’t believe you’re still deploying those stale lines after all these years.”

“Neither can I.”

“Why me?” Quanxi wanted to know.

“Love at first sight. That’s why,” Kishibe stated simply.

For once, Quanxi didn’t have an answer. Kishibe let his eyes drift down to his whiskey glass. “And because ... you won’t die on me so easily.”

His partner turned her one eye toward him. He swirled the glass of twelve-year Macallan, the sweet aroma of whiskey aged in cherrywood drifting to his nostrils.

“You spend enough time with someone, you start to feel close to them,” he said. “It’s a human thing. People in our line of work, though, they can just ... evaporate. Poof, they’re gone. You had one partner beside you yesterday, today it’s someone else. And each time, I drink a little more. So sue me for being reluctant to get close to new people.”

Quanxi remained silent.

“You don’t die, Quanxi. You don’t change. I feel like it’s safe to be close to you.”

There was a beat before Quanxi finally answered. “That’s the stupidest reason I’ve ever heard.”

“At least we’re stupid together.” The alcohol was really hitting him tonight. He leaned on the counter and fixed his partner with his most passionate gaze. “I love you.”

It was the first time he’d actually said the words to her. Nine years together, nine years seasoned with blood and misery, and he was still trying to pick this girl up. Well, why not try? For now, they were still alive.

“I realized something recently,” Quanxi began hesitantly. After a moment’s silence she continued, her expression as impassive as ever. “I think ... I might like women.”

Kishibe couldn’t help but smile even as he sighed. He let the glittering amber liquid slide down his throat. “Yeah. I know.”

Even now, even after facing death together all those times, their bond wasn’t too rich; it wasn’t too deep. But it wasn’t too sweet either. After nine years, it had the same dry flavor.

There was some comfort in that.



THE DAY THEY BECAME BUDDIES

It was white outside the window. Pure, unbroken white. The blizzard disgorged by the leaden skies overwhelmed everything—the exposed black soil, the cracked asphalt, the withered stalks of grass battered by the wind. The snow blanketed the city with untainted white. It seemed like the heavens were trying to erase the flawed world and return it to a blank slate.

No matter how deep the snow got, Aki knew, his memories would never be buried. He had lost his entire family in an instant, and the dull ache in his chest would never go away.

Aki let out a faint sigh. His eyes drifted from the window to his room in the old-fashioned inn. Denji lay spread-eagled across the antique futon, tangled in blankets. Power had draped herself over Denji's legs, which stuck out from under the covers.

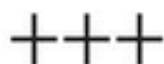
Somehow they'd managed to survive the relentless parade of international assassins who had come after Denji. Now Aki was in Hokkaido to pay his annual respects at his family's graves. The two traveling companions he'd been saddled with had made it a livelier trip than usual. Shouting on the bullet train, puking on the boat, swinging on the hand straps on the bus ... they'd even helped themselves to the food Aki had brought as a grave offering. He felt like a babysitter. He couldn't take his eyes off them for a second. Hardly the ideal situation for a sober memorial outing.

He raised an eyebrow at their snoring—the sounds weirdly sort of harmonized—then looked back out the window. “Another year, another visit ...”

Visiting his family's graves brought nothing but bad memories and depression, but with Denji and Power along, he'd barely had time for dark ruminations. Now that he finally had a second to himself, he found his thoughts drifting back to another loss.

They'd met in a graveyard, hadn't they?

Looking out at the world gone white, Aki remembered the day of his very first assignment as a Public Safety Devil Hunter.



When Aki completed his training, the first place his mentor Kishibe took him was a graveyard. Crosses stretched in every direction. The cawing of crows pierced the sky.

"Hey, Himeno," said Kishibe. "Meet your new partner."

Flowers lay before one of the many tombstones, and the woman who was to be his partner stood in front of them. The woman—Himeno, apparently—was in a badly battered state. A bandage was wrapped around her head, covering her right eye, and her right arm was in a sling. She gazed down at the tombstone, ignoring the two men.

What Aki felt at that moment, to be completely honest, was disappointment. If she'd been roughed up this badly in a fight with a devil, maybe she wasn't so tough. He'd joined Public Safety to kill the Gun Devil. How could he do that with a weakling at his side?

"Name's Aki. 'Sup," he said. He offered a quick nod as he stepped up to her, not feeling enough enthusiasm for a friendlier greeting. She continued to stare down as if dazed. Well, fine. He'd kill the Gun Devil on his own. He didn't like to get close to new people anyway. It was his personal code.

"The kid's rude, but we've trained him to be at least a little useful," said Kishibe. "Try to make it work."

Himeno didn't lift her eyes from the grave. "Are you useful?"

"Dunno. Guess so." Normally Aki had total confidence in his abilities, but the

question took him by surprise.

Himeno answered with equal ambivalence. “You’re my sixth partner. The others are dead. They were useless.”

Aki didn’t know what to say to that. Himeno’s soft, cold voice seemed drained of all emotion.

He was scrutinizing her profile, trying to decide what to make of her, when the distant eyes finally turned on him. “Don’t *you* die, Aki.”

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Their first job together came exactly two weeks later.

“Where are we going?” Aki asked.

The moment he’d arrived for work, she’d grabbed him and said, “We’re off!” She’d hustled him into the passenger seat of her car, then clammed up. Aki had no idea what was going on, and it was starting to get to him.

Himeno kept her hand on the steering wheel and her eyes on the road. “Hmm. Scene of the crime.”

“Scene? Crime? Has there been a devil attack?” Aki asked.

“Eh, not exactly. More of a fiend.”

“I didn’t hear anything about this.”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Not a word.”

“That’s okay. You’re still new, Aki. I know what’s up.”

“Maybe I’d like to know too.”

“Ah ... that ramen place we just passed is really good.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“But you don’t want to go for the ramen,” Himeno continued. “It’s all about the fried rice. Their ramen is crap. Everyone just orders the rice. They really ought to ditch the noodles and focus on fried rice, but old habits die hard.”

She sounded relaxed. Calm. She wore a patch over her right eye now, but her left eye was clear and untroubled.

For two weeks she'd been like this. The woman Aki had met at the graveyard, the grim specter whose soul seemed to have left her body, had vanished. Instead, she chattered endlessly about frivolous, trivial subjects. She'd tell him what she'd eaten yesterday, or which restaurant had the best waffles. When she wasn't talking, she was furiously doing paperwork.

It left Aki feeling unmoored; it still didn't seem like he was a devil hunter. Now they were finally off on a devil extermination mission, and she wouldn't even tell him what it was. What was she thinking?

Aki sat back in the passenger seat. The truth was, he could guess what was going through her mind. She didn't think of him as her partner, not yet. She'd lost five partners before he came along. She didn't need any more dead weight.

That was fine by him. Her injuries had healed, but he didn't need a partner who would let herself be caught unawares by a devil. He'd almost said as much to her, but he knew he was still a greenhorn and couldn't pick and choose his partners. In Public Safety, the "partner system" was the basis of everything. If he really wanted to find and destroy the Gun Devil, he had to win this woman's trust, whether she deserved him or not.

He gave Himeno a sidelong glance. "I'm more than another round of cannon fodder, you know."

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"Nothing. I'm going to open the window."

"No, don't! It's cold outside!"

"Your cigarette stinks."

Himeno's left hand was on the steering wheel while her right clutched a cigarette. The car was choked with the smell of tar.

"Aww, Aki, don't tell me you don't smoke."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Not really. It's just that for such a surly guy, you're a kid at heart ... Hey!

Close that window! Come on, your senior officer is cold!"

"You don't get to lord your authority over me just because you're a little older."

"Does that mean you don't accept me as your partner?"

"That's exactly what it means."

"We're two of a kind, then!"

Aki didn't respond. The car filled with the crackle of wind, the cold winter air, and a determined silence between the hunters. Cigarette smoke drifted out the window, a long, thin strand trailing into the sky.

"I'll check in with the guy who called us in," Himeno said. "Stand at my side and observe." Aki didn't answer. That was all she had to say when they got to the scene? Her message was as clear as it was unwelcome—*Watch and learn, rookie.*

Aki climbed out of the car to see that they'd parked in front of a sprawling apartment complex. The buildings had fallen into disrepair, but the futons draped over the balcony railings and the laundry billowing in the wind showed that the place was still at least partly occupied.

An old man stood at the entrance. "You must be the devil hunters from Public Safety. Thank you for coming all this way." He handed Himeno a business card identifying himself as the head of the company that owned the complex.

The man escorted the hunters to his office and quickly filled them in. "Several of my tenants were attacked by a fiend this week. It's discouraged some prospective occupants from moving in and convinced several current residents to move out. If things get any worse, I'm afraid my business won't be able to sustain itself."

It obviously pained him to say this. Aki recalled the number of empty windows he'd noticed when they arrived.

"Can you describe when and how the fiend attacks?" Himeno asked with a practiced air.

"Let me see ... It comes out at night, starting after dusk. It rings the bell

outside an apartment, then attacks when someone answers. That's happened three times now."

"Has anyone gotten a look at it?"

"It wears a hood, so no one has a clear description. But everyone agrees it has sharp fangs."

"Hmm. Certainly sounds fiendish."

Fiends were human corpses possessed by devils. Their nonhuman quality was frequently betrayed in the face or head. They had the minds of devils, but some retained memories of their hosts' human lives.

"They also claimed it had a weapon," the old man continued. "Some kind of small crossbow or bowgun."

"A crossbow," Himeno repeated, rubbing her chin and looking at the ground. Slowly she raised her head to meet the man's eyes. "I'd like to see it for myself. Is there any security footage?"

"I'm afraid we don't have any cameras, this place being as old as it is."

"Then how are you so sure of all this? Did the building superintendent see it?"

"No, he isn't here all the time. He hasn't seen the creature yet."

"What kind of eyewitness reports are you basing this information on?" Himeno asked. Aki had the same question.

The man's response surprised them both. "Reports from the victims. There are three survivors."

Himeno and Aki exchanged a look.

The first witness they interviewed was a portly middle-aged woman. Despite her girth, her cheeks were gaunt, and she looked ready to collapse at any moment. She entered the office, sank into an uncomfortable office chair, and began her story.

"My name's Sato. I live in apartment 101. I was attacked five days ago. The doorbell rang just as I was getting dinner ready. I couldn't see much through the peephole, but it looked like a man in a black hood. He kept his head down. The

moment I opened the door, he raised some kind of weapon. Then an arrow came straight at me.” She broke off for a moment to collect herself. “He must have missed me, but I fainted from shock. When I came to, maybe fifteen minutes or so later, I ran to the living room to see if my family was all right ...”

There she’d found her elderly mother, her husband, and their two children lying dead with arrows in their chests. That was the last detail she was able to get out before breaking down in tears.

After Mrs. Sato had left the room crying, Himeno leaned back in her chair. “You all right, Aki?”

“All right with what?”

“You look awfully on edge.”

Aki didn’t say anything.

“You can’t get too emotionally invested in the victims. You won’t last.”

“I know that!”

If Himeno thought he felt special sympathy for someone who had lost her entire family in a single devil attack, she had him all wrong. It only reaffirmed his dedication to his job.

I’ll do more than just sit and cry. I’m going to find the devil that took my family away and kill it.

Their next interviewee was a thirty-something man in glasses.

“Name’s Shinohara, apartment 202.” He seemed relaxed and open, but his shoulders were slumped. “The doorbell rang three days ago, right as I was making dinner. My wife went to answer it ... You see, I’m the cook in our house. The next thing I heard was a scream from the front hall.” His hands clenched on his knees. “I rushed over to find my wife had collapsed. A guy in a black hoodie was standing over her. It looked like he had fangs growing out of his mouth. Before I could even try to get away, he pointed a little crossbow at me. That was when I passed out.” Mr. Shinohara sipped his tea and took a few deep breaths to calm himself. “I was out for ... oh, fifteen minutes, I’d say. Luckily, the arrow he shot at me missed, but when I went over to my wife, I found another

arrow buried in her chest.”

The funeral had been yesterday, he added. That was when he finally began to cry. They’d had no children, he sobbed, just a pleasant life together, the two of them.

The man took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. “The super had sent a notice around warning everyone to watch out for a stranger in a hood, but my wife’s been spending so much time at work, she must not have seen it. If I’d gotten there first, seen who it was through the peephole, I’d never have opened the door. It’s my fault. I should have warned her ...”

He couldn’t say another word.

“Sup. I’m Yokota.” The final witness was a college student living on his own. “My room’s, like, a total mess. Okay if we talk here in the front hall?” He glanced pointedly over his shoulder at the cluttered hallway leading into apartment 301.

The first two witnesses found their apartments too traumatizing to stay in and had been put up in a hotel for the time being. Yokota, however, was still in his apartment, so Himeno and Aki had decided to visit him there.

“Guy showed up yesterday. Gotta tell ya, I was freaked out. I open the door and bam! He tries to shoot me with an arrow or something! It’s like, who *does* that?” He waved his hands in front of his face, conveying exaggerated shock.

According to his story, he’d been watching television when the doorbell rang. He’d answered the door to find a man in a black hood standing outside. He couldn’t see the man’s eyes, but in his mouth was a row of cruel fangs.

“You say they sent a notice around? Naw, never seen it. I heard about some kind of trouble downstairs, but I didn’t give it much thought. I just opened the door. Guess that’s why there’s a peephole, huh?” He tousled his hair, which was cut and bleached in a trendy campus style. “When he shot at me, I thought for sure I was dead. But I woke up just fine about fifteen minutes later. Thought for a sec maybe I was in Heaven, but nah, I was still in this dump. Nah, I wasn’t hurt. Guess the arrow missed me. I must’ve passed out from fear. Pretty sad, huh? Anyway, the guy didn’t steal anything. I’m lucky his aim sucks.”

The events were still fresh in Yokota's mind, and he could readily recount them in detail. As he was talking, a phone on the table in the hallway rang, and he excused himself to answer it.

"Yo. Yeah. I'm talkin' to a couple of peeps from Public Safety. Nah, I didn't do nothing. I'm the victim! What, really? No shit?" His eyes went wide.

"Something the matter?" Himeno asked.

"Uh, nothing. Just something I gotta deal with. You guys got everything you need?" Yokota hurriedly hung up the phone and shut the door.

With the last interview over, Himeno and Aki returned to the administrative office.

"May I ask if you've learned anything?" the superintendent said hesitantly.

Himeno drained her cup of tea in one swig. "All I can say is, we'll manage. We're pros at this."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. But we'll need your help with something."

"Of course, of course. Just say the word."

"Let us stay in one of the apartments tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow evening? Of course, I'll arrange it. Which apartment would you like?"

Himeno set her cup gently back on the desk. "401."

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The old man, fearing another incident, asked Himeno and Aki to stay that night too, to provide surveillance and security. They decided to make camp in the office.

The office comprised an entrance room with a reception window and the break room where they'd conducted two of their three interviews. Aki sat in the reception area, on alert, while Himeno sat down to a takeout feast in the break room.

“Come on, Aki,” she called. “Have a bite.”

“Can’t. I’m keeping watch.”

The office was just inside the entrance to the old apartment complex, so it was easy to keep track of anyone who came or went. Aki was scanning the area relentlessly, knowing the fiend might appear without warning, when a spoon laden with fried rice popped into view.

“Eat! I didn’t order the best fried rice in town for you to let it go cold. Go on, say ahhh!” Himeno hovered over him, the spoon in one hand and a steaming takeout container in the other.

“I can feed myself,” Aki said sullenly. Clearly, going hungry wasn’t going to be an option.

He took the spoon and tried a bite of the rice. It came from the ramen place Himeno had pointed out while they were driving, and it was as tasty as she’d claimed. The rice fell apart in his mouth, releasing a shock of black pepper and a rich aroma of sesame oil. Perfect accents.

“And this is their alleged main attraction, the soy ramen.” With a grin, Himeno proffered a bowl.

Aki paused. He remembered what she’d said—that the fried rice was delicious, but the ramen was terrible. Cautiously, he took a single mouthful.

“Urgh!” He almost choked and spat the noodles back out. It was worse than he could have imagined. What were they using for stock? Ditch water?

Himeno laughed. “Awful, right? They call it Swamp Ramen. Supposedly it’s because it’s so rich and thick, but the truth is it tastes like a swamp!”

“If you knew it was bad, why did you order it?” Aki asked, exasperated.

Himeno encouraged him. “You have to taste the horror for yourself. Here, there’s plenty more!”

Aki frowned at his cackling senior. “Enough. We’ve got work to do. We don’t have time to stuff our faces.”

“Hm? Sure we do. Humans can’t fight on an empty stomach. A pro knows to fill up when they have the chance.”

“Fine,” Aki admitted. “Maybe you’re right about the food. But what’s that you’re holding up now?”

After placing the delivery order, Himeno had gone out on a beer run. Immediately, before the food had even arrived, she cracked open the first beer. There were already five empty cans lined up on the desk. Number six was in her right hand, preparing to join them.

“This is a drink called beer,” Himeno informed him.

“You’re mocking me.”

“Oh, relax,” Himeno laughed. “You need food to fight, and you need beer to party.”

“Need I remind you this isn’t a party?” Aki admonished. “We’re here to exterminate a fiend.”

“You’re so serious, Aki. The serious ones always die young.”

“I don’t plan to go down that easy.”

Himeno was quiet for a moment. Then Aki heard beer number six hiss as she opened it. She flopped down into the office chair. “It’s fine. We’re only staying here tonight because the old guy begged us to. The real work starts tomorrow.”

“What do you mean?” Aki asked.

“I mean this will all be settled, but not tonight. Think of this as Fiend Hunt Eve.” She shoved fried rice into her mouth and raised her beer to toast an invisible companion.

Aki frowned, put off by her flippant behavior. How could she possibly know the fiend wouldn’t show up that night? It could be prowling at that very moment. Or did she already have the whole case figured out?

She brushed off his questions with a wave of her arms. “Where’s the fiend? No idea!”

Aki was more annoyed than ever. “In that case, how can you be sure it’ll ‘all be settled’ tomorrow?”



“Hey, I’m a pro.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Touchy, touchy. Are you eating right?”

“I’m trying to be serious here!” That settled it. He would never get along with this woman.

Aki continued to glare at Himeno from his spot at the reception desk. Unfazed, she pulled out a cigarette. “I don’t know where the fiend is, but since it’s only attacked residents of this complex, it’s probably nesting here or in the vicinity.”

“Then why are we sitting here with our thumbs up our rear ends? We should be out searching every nook and cranny!”

“In this huge complex?” Himeno said. “If that’s what you want to do, I won’t stop you, but we don’t have a warrant. You can’t barge into apartments, occupied or otherwise.”

Aki thought quickly. “The fiend has a distinctive appearance. We can ask around and try to identify the host.”

A fiend couldn’t alter the basic appearance of the body it possessed. If this fiend’s host was someone from the building, the neighbors might recognize it. Aki and Himeno could put together a sketch from the descriptions of the three eyewitnesses and show it around the building. Surely, sooner or later, they’d find someone who knew the person it had once been. Maybe it was even occupying its host’s apartment.

“Hmm,” said Himeno. “You’re sharper than I gave you credit for, Aki.”

“That’s a backhanded compliment if I ever heard one.”

“I hate to break it to you, though, but you’ve overlooked a crucial detail,” she said with glee. “Close, but no cigar!”

“Excuse me?”

Himeno explained. “The fiend wore a hood and kept its head down during the attacks. The only thing that the witnesses saw clearly were its fangs, which I bet

it didn't have when it was human. We don't have any info we could use to draw a sketch. Case closed. Or, rather, case still open."

Aki fell silent. Maybe the hood could provide a lead, then. No, that wouldn't work. A black hoodie? It was the most generic item of clothing imaginable. Not enough to narrow down a list of suspects, even if they had a list. Aki pursed his lips and picked up a bottle of mineral water. "All right. But that makes me even less confident we're going to wrap this up tomorrow."

"You think? I say that if we can't find the fiend, we should set a trap and let the fiend find us."

"Great. How? We have no reason to believe the fiend will show up tomorrow ni—" Aki stopped midsentence, his fingers frozen on the bottlecap.

Himeno laughed out loud. "Finally put the timeline together, did you?"

"The first attack was five days ago. The second one, three days ago. And the most recent, yesterday. It's attacking every two days ..." Which, if the rule held true, implied that the next attack would come tomorrow night. "Why, though?"

"Who knows? Frankly, who cares? Every fiend is different. It's risky to get hung up on the details. The best you can do is look for patterns and try to deduce what kind of personal rules they follow. Anyway, some fiends retain a handful of human memories. Maybe this one used to be a real anal-retentive type."

"Tomorrow it is, then."

"Yeah, but that's not all. All three attacks occurred after nightfall. I think the fiend waits until everyone is home with their families."

"So the fiend appears after dark tomorrow," Aki deduced.

"Bingo. That's my boy. I ought to give you a kiss on the cheek for being such a good guesser."

Himeno wobbled toward him, but he deftly pushed her away. "Pass." The alcohol was obviously going to her head. Himeno pouted. Aki frowned back. "We still haven't answered the biggest question of all. Where do you propose we ambush the fiend?" If they set up shop in the wrong spot, they could wait all

night and never see a thing. The office had a good view of anyone who came in, which might be effective—unless the fiend was already hiding in the complex, in which case it was pointless.

Himeno lit her cigarette slowly, as if to telegraph her disdain.

She watched the smoke drift away, clearly pleased with herself. “I told the guy we needed a room, didn’t I?”

Aki didn’t respond at first. Yes, she’d asked the owner to let them use one of the apartments in the building. Specifically, apartment 401.

“You think you know which apartment it’s going to hit? There’s no reason to think—” Aki stopped again. There *was* reason. The first set of victims had lived in apartment 101, the second in 202. And the third victim was in 301. The fiend seemed to be going up one floor each time. If Himeno was right and it was following some internal rule, it would hit the fourth floor next.

Still, Aki wasn’t convinced. “We don’t know for sure it’ll be 401. What if it’s one of the other apartments on the fourth floor?”

“Eh, I’m pretty sure I’ve got it right.” Himeno dismissed the concern. “I think the fiend starts at the first apartment on a floor and rings doorbells until someone answers.”

“I don’t agree.” The fiend had attacked the first apartment on floors one and three, but on the second floor it had attacked the second apartment. That proved it didn’t always hit the first place.

Himeno ground her cigarette out in a nearby ashtray. She lit a new one. “I noticed when we got here that 201 didn’t have any laundry hanging outside, and there are no curtains in the windows. That apartment’s not occupied. That’s why the fiend attacked the second apartment on that floor. If our target continues to play by the rules, it should show up at 401 after sundown tomorrow. We just have to wait for it. Case ... well, we’ll see.”

She cocked her head at Aki. “How about it? Starting to feel respect for me well up in your heart?”

Aki remained silent. He’d had all the same clues before him, but he hadn’t connected any of the dots. Was that the leg up that experience gave a hunter?

“True, it’d be easier to plan if we knew what kind of fiend we’re dealing with. But given the number of survivors it leaves behind, it’s kind of a slacker by fiend standards. We can figure the rest out once the fighting starts.” Himeno took a long drag on her cigarette and smirked at Aki. “What? You thought I wanted that apartment so we could shack up together?”

“Believe me, I didn’t.”

“Huh! Didn’t figure you were the type to pine for an older woman, Aki.”

“You’re drunk.” Himeno had been drinking beer like water, and her face was faintly flushed.

“Sure am. So be a good boy and get me some shochu from the corner store so I can sober up a little. You can use my car.”

“How would hard liquor help you sober up? Anyway, I don’t have my license yet.”

“No fooling?” That brought Himeno back down to earth. She blinked, then slumped over the desk, listless. “Crap. Another useless newbie.”

Aki fumed. He wanted to spit something back at her, but after getting an inkling of how far she outclassed him as a hunter, he found the words caught in his throat.

“Here’s your punishment—when we fight the fiend tomorrow, you stand back and watch. I’ll take care of this creature myself.”

“What? Are you crazy?” Aki leapt up. This was going too far. A resident passing by the window looked over, startled. “You listen to me, you drunkard. I didn’t become a devil hunter to sit on the sidelines.”

He clapped a hand on Himeno’s shoulder, but she didn’t stir. Her eyes were unfocused. “Cocky newbie,” she muttered, almost to herself. “Can’t even drive.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“Doesn’t even smoke.”

“Even less relevant!”

“You’ll die.”

“What?”

“I told you,” she murmured. “Five of my partners have bit it. I’m a jinx. Least, I seem to be ...”

Himeno finally turned toward him, but her gaze was dark and empty. She didn’t seem to see anything at all. It was the way she’d looked when he’d met her at the graveyard.

She reached out, hesitant, as if feeling for something in the dark. “You’re still so young, Aki. Lookit your baby face. Doesn’t feel right, letting you die.”

“Still don’t really think of me as your partner, huh?” Aki was frustrated. “You can take your pity and stuff it. I told you, I’m not going to go down so easily.”

Himeno didn’t seem to hear him. “They say they’re a ramen place, but the noodles are so bad and the fried rice is so good. I told them they should drop the ramen and focus on fried rice, but the owner, he’s stubborn. He’s convinced he can make the world’s best ramen ...”

Aki wasn’t sure what she was getting at. All he knew was that, having tried the alleged star dish, the owner was making a big mistake by not listening.

“Yeah? So what?”

“They’re all like that ... Think they know what they’re doing. They’re so sure. So sure and sooo wrong. Poof! Gone! Leaving their partner behind.”

Aki looked down at Himeno, draped over the desk. She looked ready to pass out. He’d had nothing but disdain for her unprofessional behavior, but now he was beginning to understand it.

“Himeno, I—” He broke off. Himeno’s one eye was closed and her breathing was even. She was asleep. “Damn,” Aki muttered. He took a swig from his bottle of water. It had gone tepid. The mingled alcohol and tobacco on Himeno’s breath burned his nostrils. The only sound in the room was the heater laboring away. A hollow sound in an empty night.

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When the old man came to check in the next morning, Aki told him there hadn't been any trouble. Then he put in an appearance at Public Safety, where he found Himeno had taken the morning off, leaving only a succinct instruction —“Meet me at the scene at dusk.”

He kept busy at headquarters without his partner around. When the sun began its descent through the sky, he hopped on a bus.

The old man showed him to apartment 401. The occupants had taken their valuables and gone to stay with relatives for the night. Word must have gotten around about what was happening, because the grounds of the complex, full of noise and life just the evening before, were empty. The shadows of the buildings swathed the area in darkness. The playground stood abandoned; a seesaw rocked back and forth in the wind, each movement producing a little screech like the cry of a wild animal.

The apartment's floor plan was simple. Just past the entryway was the toilet. At the end of a short hallway, a door opened into a dining room. Adjacent to the dining room were a bath on one side and a pair of standard bedrooms on the other. The climate control was on the fritz, leaving the air chilly. The evening sun pouring through the aluminum-framed windows dyed the tatami floors orange; they smelled noticeably musty.

Aki noted a calendar marked with a local supermarket's “deal days.” A ventilation fan dripping with oil. A refrigerator whose age looked like it could be measured geologically, with a notice about trash collection stuck to the door with a magnet. It wasn't much, but it was somebody's home. To Aki, it felt like a taste of what he'd lost in Hokkaido. The Gun Devil had taken this from him. Home. Family. Everything.

Aki checked the time. 3:30. He found a spot in the cluttered dining room where he could sit and watch the front door. He slid his katana out of its scabbard and gazed at the blade. The faint silver gleam helped him calm down. He expected to make a contract with a devil sooner rather than later, and it felt good to have his weapon ready. He took a deep breath, hand still on his sword —and at that moment the doorknob turned.

Aki drew in his breath and jumped to his feet. A familiar one-eyed face

popped in. “Just dropping by!” Himeno joked. When she saw Aki’s face, she scratched her head awkwardly. “Sorry for passing out on you yesterday, Aki. If it makes you feel any better, my head’s pounding from the hangover, and I ache all over from sleeping on the desk.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got no one but yourself to blame.”

“I don’t usually go down that easy. Maybe I’m getting old. Hey, how old do you think I am?”

“Don’t care.”

Himeno sighed, then locked the door and sat down beside him. “I don’t remember last night super clearly. I didn’t say anything, like, *weird*, did I?”

“Lots of things.”

“Oh no, really? But I didn’t get violent, did I?”

“You got in my face, but I pushed you back.”

“Ugh! I’m the worst! Pathetic ...” Himeno clutched her head dramatically, then gave up the histrionics with another sigh. “Well, what’s done is done. I’ll have to make it up to you by absolutely crushing it tonight.”

With a *hup!* she got to her feet. He could hear her joints crack as she stretched. “Just remember what I told you,” she said, pausing in front of him. “You stand back and watch.”

“You remember that much, huh?”

He was damned if he was going to listen, though. The hallway was too narrow for both of them to attack at once, so the best he could plan for was to be ready to jump in at any moment.

Now they just had to wait for their opponent to arrive. Aki realized his breathing had grown short. He put a hand on his chest and took a few deep, deliberate breaths to center himself. Even Himeno had stopped chattering.

Twilight faded into dark, accompanied by an announcement over the complex’s PA system—“A suspicious character has been sighted in the neighborhood. Please be sure to lock your doors.” A melancholy day-end melody followed. Then there was only the slow march of time. Aki felt like his

nerves were being shaved away bit by bit.

No fiend so far. For a second, he was filled with doubt. Maybe they'd guessed wrong. Himeno, however, showed no sign of concern. The slanting sunlight outside dyed the sky orange. It was the witching hour, a liminal moment between day and night as the world slipped into darkness.

Ding dong.

The friendly notes of the doorbell broke the clinging gloom. Aki's hand tensed on his sword. He traded a short glance with Himeno.

The enemy had come.

Aki was about to stand when Himeno held up a hand to stop him. She approached the door as quietly as possible, looked through the peephole, then made a circle with her fingers—*Okay*.

Ding dong. Ding dong. Ding dong. The clanging peal of the bell turned insistent.

"What's the plan?" Aki hissed. He suddenly realized that over the past night and day, they hadn't talked about what they were going to do or how they were going to do it. Maybe Himeno had deliberately kept him in the dark. After all, she didn't want him in the fight.

Now all he wanted to know was how Himeno planned to strike. Whoever the human host had been, the fiend carried a crossbow and knew how to use it. Its M.O. seemed to be to attack the moment the door was opened. Blocking that first strike would be key to the entire battle.

Then, as Aki's jaw dropped in disbelief, Himeno casually opened the door.

The fiend was exactly as the witnesses had described. Its eyes were hidden in a black hood, but it seemed to be gazing at the ground. Twisted fangs sprouted at wild angles from its mouth. Judging from what he could see of its body, Aki guessed the host had been in middle age. And there was the infamous crossbow, clutched in the creature's right hand. It was loaded with a small, black, very sharp arrow, and it was pointed right at Himeno.

"What the hell are you doing?" Aki shouted. Himeno didn't even try to dodge.

She knew the fiend's reported attack pattern as well as he did, yet she stood still, as if offering herself up.

Aki sprang to his feet, ready to run to her, when the fiend choked out a soft grunt. Its right arm twisted back, dragged by an unseen force. The arrow lodged in the ceiling, never coming anywhere near Himeno. She continued to stand calmly, now grasping the air with her right hand.

"Wha ... ?" Aki stopped short, astonished. With a flourish, Himeno thrust out her arm. Her fist stopped well short of the fiend, yet there was an audible *thump*.

With a cry, the fiend bent double and gagged with pain. It was flung backward, striking the door, then pitched forward again.

Aki gasped down at the fiend lying on the ground. "Was that ... a devil's power?"

"Bingo." Himeno glanced back at him with a smirk and gave him a thumbs-up with the hand that had just demolished the fiend. "I have a contract with the Ghost Devil. I traded my right eye for its right hand. Completely invisible, way powerful. You could say it's a *handy* thing to have around."

"You could have told me."

"Oh, didn't I?"

"No, you didn't," he snapped. He knew it wasn't advisable for hunters to go around telling everyone which devils they had contracts with, but surely you ought to inform someone when you were going into battle together. Yet more proof that she still didn't see him as her partner.

Himeno didn't appear to feel so much as a twinge of guilt about it. She turned back to the collapsed fiend. "Oh, well. The problem's taken care of. And now we're square for me getting sloppy drunk on you. How about it? Feel like giving me the respect a senior deserves yet?"

A pause. "I'm thinking about it."

Himeno chuckled and nodded. Then she reached out with her invisible hand to grab the fiend by the throat.

Aki's brow furrowed. Something was off. Some tiny detail. What was it? The fiend was still splayed motionless on the floor. Aki dropped into a fighting stance but saw nothing to attack. Himeno's ghost arm was about to make short work of the fiend.

No. Wait ...

"Get down!" Aki grabbed Himeno's collar and yanked her to the ground. An arrow sliced through the air, grazing her hair before burying itself in the back of the door.

"Wha ... ?" Himeno sat up and blinked. "Did that arrow come from the fiend?"

"Yeah."

"No shit? But it never had time to reload."

"I know."

The crossbow had gone off, firing its only arrow, when Himeno's ghost had twisted its arm. That round was buried in the ceiling. Not only had the fiend not had a chance to reload, it had never even moved. Yet a black arrow had remained nocked in the crossbow. That was the errant detail Aki had unconsciously picked up on.

With a groan, the fiend pulled itself up. The hood fell back, revealing thinning hair and a forehead carved with deep lines. But the fiend's eyes were its most distinctive feature. They were flat black, like the painted-on eyes of a doll.

A dark miasma drifted like a mist from the creature's eyes and mouth, as if its hatred were physically condensing. The mist curled down its arms, where it solidified into two black crossbows, one in each hand. Each weapon held five rounds.

"Hah! Now I get it." Himeno jumped to her feet. She put a hand on Aki's shoulder, then backed away. "Guess I should've been a little more careful ..."

"Here it comes!"

Himeno and Aki threw open the door to the dining room and dove through as arrows buried themselves in the wall. The crossbow hadn't belonged to the fiend's human host after all. The weapons were part of the fiend itself. Since

they were supernatural, it was probably too much to hope that they'd run out of ammunition.

Aki slammed the door shut and braced it with his feet. On the other side, the fiend pounded on the door so hard Aki could feel the blows through his entire body. Himeno shoved a cabinet full of tableware across the room to use as a blockade.

Aki drove his sword through the door. He didn't feel an impact on the other side. The fiend must have dodged. Its response came in the form of black arrowheads that burst through the door like nails from a nail gun. Aki twisted out of the way. Himeno thrust out her right arm, directing a phantom punch past the door. There was a yelp as she connected. The fiend must have gotten back on its feet, though, because a bevy of arrows rammed the door with the speed of a machine gun round.

Aki stabbed; Himeno punched; arrows fired. It seemed to go on forever. Only a door stood between the two sides, but since neither could see their target, neither side's accuracy was very good. With each exchange, the wood of the door strained and splintered. The building was old to begin with, and it wasn't built for a fight like this. Himeno gave the cabinet another shove, blocking the door entirely. As far as defensive structures went, it didn't instill much confidence. The cabinet shook under each blow from the fiend, sending plates shattering on the ground.

"I feel bad for whoever lives here. And for myself. This is gonna mean extra paperwork." Himeno patted Aki on the back. "No crying over spilled plates, though. Aki, fall back."

"Excuse me?"

"I'll handle this. Somehow."

The blockade was only delaying the inevitable. To end this, they had to get line of sight on their adversary—which meant giving it line of sight on them. It'd be better if they were able to move first.

Unfortunately, the fiend was still armed with its brace of crossbows. Himeno wouldn't be able to pin both of its arms with her single ghost hand. One would always be free to shoot. She could ignore the weapons and go straight for its

throat, or try to land a single, fatal blow to its heart. But if it took her more than an instant, she'd be riddled with arrows. In these tight quarters, there would be no way to avoid them.

Aki could see only one solution—to win this, they'd have to work together. He braced his shoulder against the quaking cabinet and sucked in a large breath. "I'll pin it down. Then you can do ... whatever it is you're going to do."

"No. You're still new at this, Aki. You'll only get yourself killed!" Himeno's normally flip tone was replaced by something tinged with panic. She grabbed his free shoulder with all the strength of a hunter who had buried her fifth partner just two weeks ago.

Aki placed his hand over hers and gently pried it away. "Yeah, I'm new at this. But I'm your partner."

"Aki ..."

"Let's do this!" He pressed his back to the doorframe and kicked the cabinet aside. With the weight gone, the half-demolished door flew open. He could sense the fiend, close enough to touch, but he resisted the urge to lash out with his sword. If he missed his mark by even an inch, he'd make himself a target. His job was to immobilize the enemy long enough for his partner to strike.

Calmly, now. Steady breath. Focus.

The instant the fiend entered the room, Aki's hand snapped out and grabbed its right arm. Not missing a beat, the fiend raised the crossbow in its left hand. But Aki was just as quick. With his free hand, he grabbed the fiend's left wrist. Now both crossbows were neutralized.

Himeno didn't waste the chance to wrap her ghost hand around the fiend's neck. It screamed in agony. Now that they had it literally by the throat, victory seemed assured.

Then Aki's eyes went wide. As the fiend screamed, a cruel black arrow appeared in its throat.

"Aki!" Himeno shouted.

"Forget about me! Finish it!"

She had to strike. There wouldn't be a second chance.

An invisible fist wrung the fiend's neck like a dishtowel. In a final burst of spite, the creature spat the arrow from its throat. It slammed into Aki's chest with a *thock*. The monster's death rattle was drowned out by Himeno's scream.

"Aki ... *Aki!*"

"I ... I'm all right," he whispered. "I will ... *not* ... die!" It was the last thing he said before he blacked out.

When he came to, he could feel the scratch of old tatami flooring under his head. "I'm ... alive?" Himeno was looking down at him. When she saw him open his eyes, she almost collapsed with relief.

Aki glanced around the room from his position on the floor. Shards of broken china were everywhere. The fiend's headless corpse lay in the hallway. Outside the window, the twilight had deepened. He found a clock and discovered he'd been unconscious for about fifteen minutes.

"I told you I wouldn't die."

"The arrow hit you, didn't it?" Himeno asked.

"Yeah."

"I don't see it anywhere."

"I figured as much." Himeno shot him a questioning look. He tried to marshal enough of his wits to explain. "I thought there was something funny about the fiend's pattern."

"How do you mean?"

"In every attack, there was a survivor. At first I thought it was dumb luck, or the fiend was sloppy. Until you pointed out how precise the rest of its behavior was. Attacking every other day, working its way up the building floor by floor, starting from the first apartment each time. Anal-retentive, right? Didn't seem like the type that would rely on luck or miss its shots. So I thought maybe the survivors weren't a mistake. Maybe they were just what the fiend wanted."

Himeno said nothing, silently urging him to continue.

“You said it yourself,” Aki commented. “It’s easier to plan if you know what kind of fiend you’re dealing with. So I went back over what happened in those attacks.”

In the first incident, the woman who had been shot first survived and the rest of her family was killed. In the second, the wife died while her husband, the second target, survived. The third case involved a student living alone who survived even after seemingly being shot.

“What’s the connection?” Himeno asked. “Other than the surprisingly high survival rate?”

“My theory is that a person hit with the fiend’s arrow is knocked out but lives. Instead, *whoever they love most dies.*” Himeno gasped. “I think we took on the fiend of loneliness.”

“Loneliness ...”

“My guess? A man died alone somewhere in this complex and was possessed by the Loneliness Devil. The fiend didn’t want to kill people. It wanted to make people as desolate as it was. That’s what happened, right? The survivors were left with no one.”

“Are you sure about that? The woman in the first attack lost her family. But what about the couple in the second attack? The wife was attacked first. By your logic, shouldn’t she have survived and the husband died?”

“Yeah. *If* she’d loved him.”

That brought Himeno up short.

“She was having an affair at work,” explained Aki. “She no longer loved the man she was married to. When she got hit with the arrow, she passed out, but her husband lived. But the poor guy still loved his wife, so when he got shot, she died.”

“Hang on! An affair at work? How could you possibly know that?”

“I did some investigating while you were sleeping off that hangover. At the exact time the apartment was attacked, the wife’s boss died under mysterious circumstances. An arrow through the heart.”

“What about the third case, then?” Himeno gaped.

“You remember how the guy got a phone call at the end of our interrogation? It really seemed to upset him. While you were down for the count, I looked into that too. Turns out his mother died. Same deal. She was a single mother, all he had.” The phone call, Aki gathered, had been from a neighbor who’d discovered the mother’s body.

Himeno blinked her one eye twice, then three times. “You knew the person who gets shot doesn’t die. Is that why you were willing to take the hit?”

“Pretty much.” He hadn’t exactly been eager to go down for fifteen minutes. But he’d been ready to throw himself in front of the arrow if necessary.

“You didn’t tell me any of this!”

“Pot, kettle. You wouldn’t even tell me what we were here to do.”

“Yeah, but ...” Himeno’s face contorted in exasperation.

“Still think I’m just cannon fodder?”

Himeno gave him a long, hard look. Abruptly, something seemed to occur to her. “Hang on here! I have to admit, I’m almost impressed, but that was reckless. You knew you’d survive, but the people you cared about would die! How could you possibly do it, knowing that?”

“Believe me, it wasn’t a problem.”

“The hell it wasn’t! What about your family, Aki? Friends? A girlfriend?”

Aki stood up, brushing the dirt off his suit. The sun in the western sky was red as blood, soaking the world in a throbbing, melancholy glow. They’d named his brother after it. Taiyo. It meant “sun.” But he was cut off from its warmth now, buried deep in the cold, hard ground. The sun would never rise again for Aki’s little brother. He’d never feel the warmth of dawn on his skin. Aki would never see him walking over the horizon.

Taiyo had this much in common with his namesake—he was utterly, forever, beyond Aki’s grasp. For the barest instant, the dust drifting through the air, caught in the dying light, looked like the snow falling on his home.

He said, “There’s no one left I care about.”

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With the case resolved, they waited outside the apartment for the cleanup crew. Aki leaned against the fourth-floor railing, gazing down at the city below. Himeno lit a cigarette. “You don’t smoke, Aki?” The chill wind lifted her bangs. An airship floated lazily in the distant sky.

Aki didn’t look at her. “No. It’ll rot your bones.”

“We’re gonna be working together closely. You should learn.”

“I’m not here to make friends.”

He heard Himeno sigh softly. “Let me guess. You came to Public Safety to kill the Gun Devil, right?”

That made him turn.

“It’s the same for all the dark and brooding types who join Public Safety. Since we’re the only ones allowed to carry pieces of that damn gun,” Himeno explained.

That much was certainly true. He was doing all this to get at the Gun Devil, the devil that had taken his family. He was prepared to sacrifice everything to do it. As far as he was concerned, he already had.

Did Himeno recognize the commitment Aki had made? Her tone gave nothing away as she chirped, “Us devil hunters don’t live long anyway. It’s not the smoking that’s gonna kill you.”

“I won’t bite it so easily,” Aki said firmly.

“You’d better not.” Himeno leaned back. With the faintest of smiles on her face, she said, “It’s a hassle when my partners die on me ...”

There was a gust of wind, but he was sure he’d heard it—*partners*.

Himeno exhaled a trail of smoke that meandered through the winter air and tickled Aki’s nostrils. He thought suddenly that the acrid aroma of nicotine and tar wasn’t so unbearable after all.

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“Himeno ...” Aki murmured. The snow was still falling outside his hotel room in Hokkaido. He closed his eyes to it as his departed partner’s name crossed his lips.

That had been his first case as a devil hunter. Not that much time had passed, so why did it feel like it had happened long ago? Because so much had changed, he decided. He’d started treating his partner with the respect due to a senior officer and had even learned how to be halfway polite. Together they’d buried devil after devil—along with more of their colleagues than Aki wanted to remember.

It wasn’t just life around him that had changed, though. There was something else now.

Aki gazed around the room. Denji and Power were still snoring boisterously. “Himeno,” he said, “I don’t think I could go up against the Loneliness Fiend now.”

He’d been prepared to give up everything to kill the Gun Devil. There had been no sacrifice he wasn’t willing to make. He’d had no one to care about. And now here he was, worried about losing these two. After the loss of his family, he hadn’t believed he’d ever find anything or anyone he wished to protect, anyone whose happiness mattered to him.

The blankets shifted. Denji crawled out from under Power. “What’s up with you, all lost in the view?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Denji sat across from him and looked out the window. “Can’t see crap with all this snow.”

Aki was silent for a moment. Slowly he brought his can of beer to his lips. “Every year, when I went to visit my family’s graves, I’d remember nothing but bad things. It was depressing. But this time, you guys were such pests that I didn’t have the time to get lost in bad memories.”

Denji gave him a blank look. “You’re welcome ... ?”

A corner of the bleak, snow-clad sky was beginning to brighten. Morning was coming to Aki's frost-stricken home.



ENOSHIMA, ISLAND OF DREAMS

Denji was awakened by the noise of his own snoring. Motes of light danced at the edges of his vision. It took him a second to realize they were a product of the sunlight pouring through the windows. Houses whipped past, vanishing as soon as they appeared.

A steady rhythm tickled his ears—*Ka-chunk ka-chunk. Ka-chunk ka-chunk.* The sound of a train traveling along the rails. The gentle thrumming that came up through his seat was so relaxing, it was almost like he was still asleep.

“What’m I doing on a train?” he asked, yawning.

The horned woman in the next seat rolled her eyes. “Get the sleep out of your brain, Denji.”

“Knock it off, Power,” said the dark-haired man sitting across from her. He turned to Denji. “This is why I told you to turn in early last night.”

“It’s all right, Hayakawa,” said the last member of their party, a woman in navy blue across from Denji. When he looked at her, it was hard to think about much else. “Denji was too excited about this trip to sleep. Isn’t that right, Denji?”

“Ms. Makima!” said Denji, almost jumping out of his seat. “Oh, that’s right. Enoshima.”

It finally came back to him. At long last they were making good on their promise. Makima and the three residents of the Hayakawa household were taking a trip to Enoshima.

“You woke up just in time,” Makima said, smiling. She was right—outside the windows, the residential areas were giving way to a crystal-blue sea. The sun glittered off the surface of the water and gilded the white-capped waves. A flock of seabirds passed high above them, crying out as they glided majestically across the sky.

“Holy shit! It’s the sea!” Denji exclaimed.

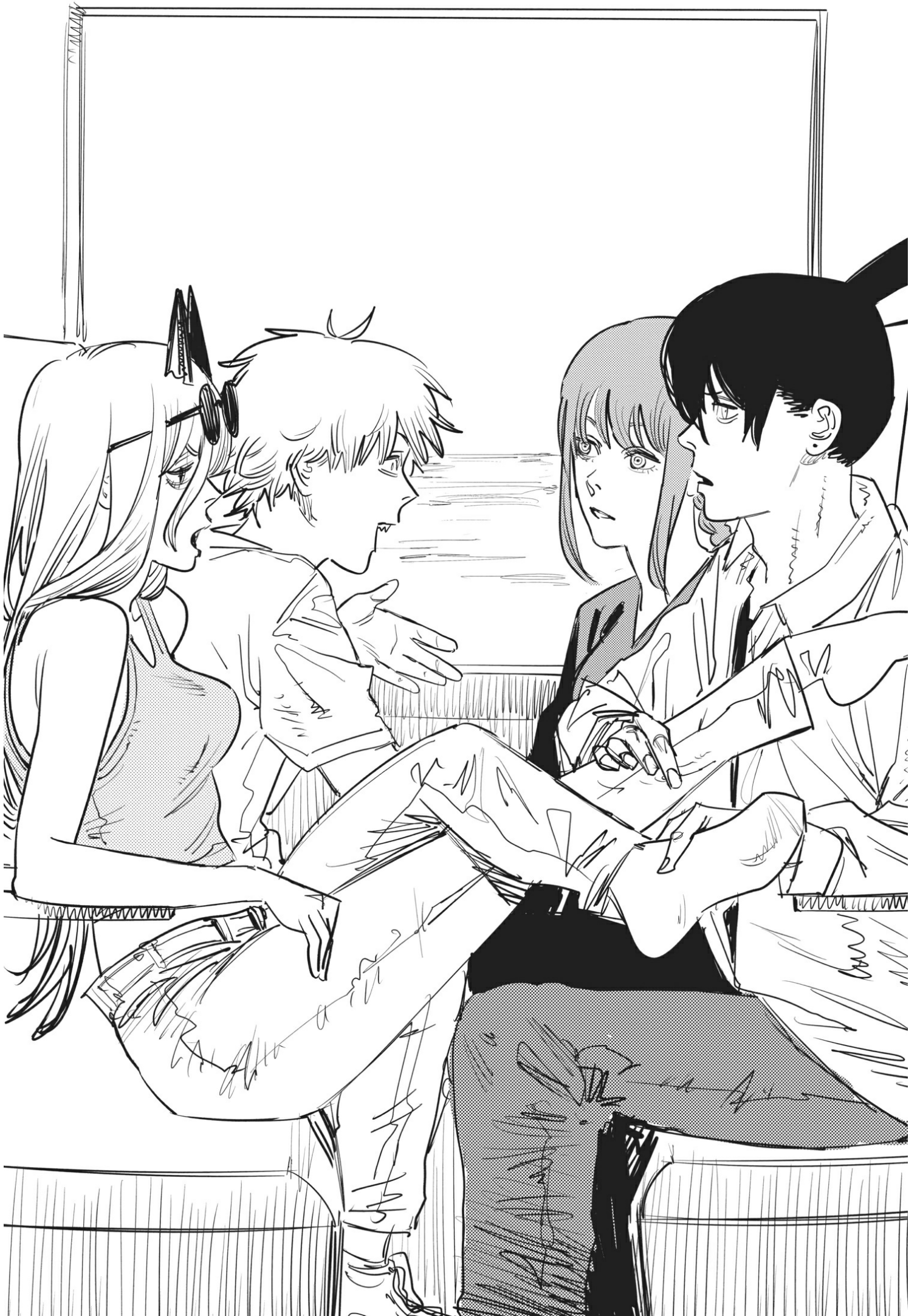
“The sea! The sea!” Power added. They both pressed their faces to the windows.

“Keep it down, you two.” Aki scowled. “We’re not the only ones on board.”

Denji shared a grin with Power. They linked arms like siblings. “Ahh, get the stick outta your ass,” said Denji. “If you can’t get excited about the beach, when can you?”

“Topknot is a fussypuss about everything!”

“At least *try* to consider the people around you,” Aki grumbled.



“Oh, let them be, Hayakawa. It’s not every day we get to take a vacation,” Makima said evenly. The window was slightly open, letting in a sea breeze that played with her bangs.

“If you say so, Ms. Makima ...” Aki acquiesced.

Aki’s meek turn gratified Denji, who leaned back in his seat. “Man, a vacation with Ms. Makima! It’s like a dream come true!”

“Well, you’ve all been working so hard lately. I’m only sorry we can’t take more outings like this. Usually we have to stick close to the office,” Makima said.

Denji waved his hands carelessly. “Take it from me, ma’am! Enoshima’s gonna rock!”

“I’m curious, Denji,” said Aki. “Do you have the slightest idea what the Island of Enoshima is?”

Denji answered him with a snort. “An island. Obviously.”

“That’s true, but this island is ... special,” Makima said. She made a circle with the thumb and index finger of her right hand. “Most islands are surrounded by water at all times, yes?” She pressed her left index finger against the bottom of the circle. “Enoshima is what they call a land-tied island. Accumulated sand forms a kind of bridge between the island and the mainland.”

“Ah! Of course!” Denji crossed his arms and nodded knowingly, even though he found Makima’s explanation murky at best.

She smiled and put her hands down. “Think of it this way. Most islands are lonely. They can’t touch anything. Enoshima is connected to the land, so it’s not a lonely island.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense.” Denji let his arms fall to his side. Enoshima, the island that wasn’t lonely. That was a description he could work with.

“And there it is.” Makima pointed a slender finger out the window. A strip of green had emerged on the horizon, framed by puffy white clouds.

“Wow,” said Denji. “Smaller than I expected.”

“You may be interested to know,” Power announced, “that I have a summer home on that island!”

“Sure, nice,” Denji replied, disinterested.

“Why aren’t you impressed?” Power demanded. “Surely you don’t think I’m lying?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“An insult!” Power declared. “Still, you remain my partner. I’m telling you, ’tis true!”

Denji could tell she wasn’t going to drop this. “Fine. Where’s this house of yours, then?”

Power leaned in close and pointed out the window. “Right over there! See the luxurious mansion that pierces the heavens at the very center of the island?” In the distance, Denji could make out a building shaped like a huge candle.

“Behold, my villa!”

“Power, that’s the Enoshima lighthouse,” said Aki.

Without missing a beat, Power smacked Denji on the shoulder. “There’s the lighthouse, Denji! Bet you didn’t know about the lighthouse!”

“Well, geez, I do *now*, thanks.”

“You two make quite a pair.” Makima smiled. With genuine curiosity, she added, “Is it like this at home?”

Denji scratched his head. “Yeah, we’re a regular comedy duo, twenty-four-seven.”

It was the same kind of banter he exchanged with the team at work, yet here, beyond the everyday, it seemed fresh and new.

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At last the train pulled to a halt at the shore overlooking the island of Enoshima.

“We can drop off our luggage at the hotel,” said Makima, “before we take a

look around.” They piled out at the station and made their way to a beachside hotel. After leaving their luggage as Makima had suggested, they returned outside to the island sunshine.

Denji jogged to join Makima at the head of the group. “So, Ms. Makima, what’s the plan?”

“Good question. What do you want to do, Denji?”

“I wanna do anything, as long as it’s with you.”

“At least try to come up with your own damn ideas!” Aki called from behind them. “Ms. Makima, as long as we’re here, I think we should do some sightseeing.” He brandished a guidebook.

“The sea! The sea calls to me!” Power threw a hand in the air. “Swimming time!”

Makima tapped a finger to her chin, then gave a slight nod. “All right, here’s what we’ll do. Let’s start with a quick tour of the island. Then we can take a dip in the ocean. When it gets dark, it’ll be the perfect time to try out the hotel amenities. And then ...”

“Yes?” said Denji. “And then what? What comes after that?”

“Well ... I promise you’ll like it.”

Denji felt a rush of curiosity, but for the moment, strolling at Makima’s side was enough for him.

“Once we cross Benten Bridge, we’ll be on Enoshima proper,” Makima said, pointing to a bridge that stretched over a sandbar ahead of them. They were almost there! The island looked much bigger up close.

The midsummer sun cast stark shadows on the paving stones. As bright as it was, the sea breeze cooled the heat. Denji listened to the waves wash in and recede again. It really was like the sea was calling to them.

“Enoshima!” said Denji, emotion overtaking him as he set foot on the island at last. They passed beneath a looming vermilion torii gate. Beyond, the street burst on both sides with restaurants and souvenir shops.

“Look, Topknot!” Power yelled from the back of the group. “Food! I wish to

eat!" She sniffed the air.

""Eat? Again? Didn't we already buy you a boxed lunch at the train station?"

"Lunch ...lunch ..." Power feigned innocence. "No, I've never eaten this 'lunch' you speak of."

Aki shrugged helplessly and veered into the nearest eatery. A few minutes later, he emerged with a soft-serve ice cream cone. "It's on me. As long as we're on vacation, we might as well treat ourselves."

Power gleefully snatched the cone from him. "Gah ha ha! A fine decision! I— Wait, why is there fish on this?" Close inspection revealed that the dark ice cream was indeed topped with scads of tiny white fish.

"It's special. Unique to Enoshima. Be glad you get to try a local delicacy."

"Hrm ..." Ever so reluctantly, Power took a bite. "It tastes ... like the sea ..." she grimaced and looked a bit seasick.

"Gimme some of that, Power," said Denji. He grabbed the ice cream and took a huge bite off the top. "Holy crap! That's *good*!"

"Good?" Power said, disgusted. "I am bewildered by the idea of putting fish on ice cream."

"What's the problem? You get to eat ice cream *and* you get to eat fish. Saves time!"

"Not a picky eater, are you?" Aki took the ice cream from Denji. He bit in and closed his eyes. After a moment, he said, "Huh. That's not half bad. The sweetness of the ice cream complements the saltiness of the fish better than you'd expect. And the textures go really well together."

"You act grossed out, then you say you like it," said Denji. "Make up your dang mind."

"Yes, Topknot! Your dang mind needs making!"

"I'm just expressing my opinions. Don't get your knickers in a knot, you two."

Ahead, Makima chuckled. "Nice to know the Hayakawa family is so close."

Denji, Power, and Aki looked at each other. Aki rubbed his neck and sighed. "I

don't know if I'd say *close*. I feel like a parent with a couple of rebellious brats."

"Sheesh. Real nice, Aki!" Denji grumbled.

"I daresay it is we who are always looking after you, Topknot. You should consider it an honor!" Power said haughtily.

"Don't put on airs!" Aki said.

"You're right, Hayakawa," said Makima. "You do seem like their mom."

"Their m-m-mom ... ?" Aki stood stupefied.

Denji and Power doubled over laughing.

"You're a mommy, Aki!" Denji crowed.

"A mom with a topknot!"

"Pipe down! Shut up! I'll throw you both in the ocean!" Mother Hayakawa hissed as his two contrary children ran circles around him, dodging his blows.

As something resembling calm finally descended on the group, they found themselves working their way down the shopping street by the bridge. Beyond, they could see a flight of stairs and another torii gate.

"That's Enoshima Shrine up ahead," Makima said, leading them under the gate. Aki read from the guidebook as they walked, pointing out the shrine's three halls along with a smattering of historical anecdotes. For Denji, it went in one ear and out the other. All he knew was that the further they went, the bigger the sea looked and the better his mood got.

When they reached the third hall, Makima turned to Denji and Power. "Have either of you paid respects at a shrine before?"

They both shook their heads.

"Nope," said Denji.

"I'm basically a god," said Power with an air of superiority. "You should be worshipping *me*."

"Let me show you what to do." Makima smiled and took a five-yen coin from her wallet. She dropped it into an offering box. She bowed her head twice, clapped twice, and then bowed again, bringing her hands together in front of

her with her eyes closed. “That’s how you send a wish to the gods.”

“Gah ha ha!” laughed Power. “I’ve never heard anything so stupid. You make your own wishes come true through sheer force!” But that didn’t stop her from darting forward excitedly to try it herself. She flung a coin—procured from Aki—into the offering box, then gave two huge, dramatic claps. “I wish for a Nobel Prize! And also that all humans everywhere will die, and also that the monster known as Makima will vanish from this world!”

“You’re not supposed to say your wishes out loud, Power, my dear,” Makima advised.

“You’re sure wishing up a storm for someone who thinks it’s stupid,” said Denji.

Power froze, then turned with a cunning look on her face. “You must have misheard. Denji said the part about wanting you to vanish!”

“Why would I say that?” Denji disputed the slander.

“Don’t worry,” said Makima. “For today, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear anything. We’ll just enjoy our little vacation.”

Power breathed a sigh of relief. Aki cleared his throat. “I guess I’ll go next.” He approached the shrine and offered his respects quietly.

“Yo, Aki,” said Denji as Aki stepped away from the shrine. “What’d you wish for?”

“I’ll be keeping that to myself, thanks.”

“I bet I can guess. It was, like, revenge or something, wasn’t it?” Denji prodded, as if he cared.

“That would be a better wish than the ones Power made, but I’m not going to bother the gods with that. I can get revenge on my own.”

“What was it then?” Denji wouldn’t drop it.

“I don’t have to tell you.”

Denji and Power glanced at each other, then ducked together for a whispered conversation. “Sounds sketchy,” said Denji. “Do you think he wished for

something, y'know, filthy?"

"I don't think. I know! Topknot acts like a prude, but the animal lust *rolls* off him!"

"That's enough out of both of you!" Aki snapped. He looked at the ground and his voice suddenly became much quieter. "I prayed that you both find happiness."

That brought Denji and Power up short. They looked at each other again—then burst out laughing.

"What, like, seriously?!"

"You pray for the dumbest things, Topknot!"

"Dammit! I take it back!"

"You two be nice to your mother."

"I'm not their mom, Ms. Makima!"

As the brief furor subsided, Makima gave Denji a gentle push. "One more to go. Your turn, Denji."

"Gee, I, uh ... okay ..." Denji approached the offering box and stood uncertainly, then clapped as he'd seen the others do. When he closed his eyes, he realized he had no idea what to pray for. The first thing he thought of was Pochita, but Makima had told him that Pochita was alive inside him. Somehow Denji felt it was wrong to ask for more than that. He was on his way to achieving the normal life he'd always wished for, and now he was on a beach vacation with Makima, the kind of trip he'd thought he could only take in his dreams.

There were still things he wanted, of course. To eat steak for breakfast every morning. To have tons of girlfriends, even if he was foggy about exactly what he'd do with them. But he wasn't sure what to ask for. Denji had a dim intuition that if he wished for too many things, none of them would come true.

Denji let his eyes flutter open. He glanced back. Makima stood framed in the sunlight, kissed by the sea breeze. She looked at him quizzically. Surely no one could be so sweet.

It's gotta be Ms. Makima, Denji thought. He stuck his elbows way out so he could press his hands together as hard as possible. *I pray that I get to go on another trip with Ms. Makima!*

No, no, wait. He was talking to the *gods*. Was he going to bug them with a weak-ass request like that?

I pray Ms. Makima will go out with me!

Good start, but he could do better. Wishing didn't cost anything.

I pray I could have s—I mean, uh, make love to Ms. Makima! He'd better watch his language with the gods. That'd show them he'd grown up a little since Aki had castigated him about his dirty mouth when he first arrived at Public Safety.

Even after those prayers, Denji remained silent with his hands pressed together. He couldn't shake the sense that he was forgetting something. Something important. In the end, he let his hands drift apart without remembering what it was.

As they trotted down the path back from the shrine, Makima glanced at him. "What did you pray for, Denji?"

"Oh—uh—nothing special."

"Oh?" Her almond-shaped eyes gave him a long, hard look.

"What?" Denji sweated under the gaze.

"Was it something ... inappropriate?" Makima hinted.

"N-no, I swear!" he said, averting his eyes. Then he had a thought. "What did *you* pray for, Ms. Makima?"

"Me? I prayed for clear weather tonight."

That left Denji scratching his head. Makima gave him a teasing smile and hopped down the stairs away from the shrine. "All right. To the sea!"

"Swimming!" Power exclaimed, raising her hands to the clear blue sky. Act Two of their vacation had begun.

The group found a beach at the foot of Benten Bridge. The sunbaked sand

brought the heat of summer to the soles of their feet. Denji and Aki, wearing swim trunks, sat under a rented umbrella with their knees drawn up to their chests as they waited for Makima and Power to emerge from the changing area.

“Oh, man!” said Denji, barely able to hear himself over the pounding of his heart. “I’m so stoked to see Ms. Makima in a swimsuit! What do you think it’ll look like?” He squinted in the sun.

After a pause, Aki shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Well, duh. But it’s fun to wonder! You think it’ll be, like, a bikini? I bet it’s black!” Makima always looked so coolly beautiful in her tailored black suits, it was hard to picture her in another color.

“You shouldn’t be picturing your superiors in swimsuits,” Aki admonished.

“Aw, what’s wrong with it? Just ‘cause *you* don’t have any imagination ...” Denji flopped down on the sand, sulking.

Aki gave a long sigh. He muttered, “It wouldn’t be black. Ms. Makima would wear white.”

“You think?” Denji’s head whipped up. When he’d first moved in with Aki, he’d thought the older hunter was a nagging pain in the ass. Now, he was starting to discover, maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy.

Aki gazed over the horizon. “Hey, Denji ...”

“Yeah?”

“I used to take you for nothing but a cheap street punk, but you’re starting to learn how to listen to people, aren’t you? At least ... a little.”

Denji smirked. “Suddenly feeling all warm and squishy?”

“Just a passing thought.”

“Weird thought.”

Aki pressed on. “Keep listening, okay? And learn how to be halfway polite, for God’s sake.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll see what I can do.”

Aki really did sound like a mom. Or at least what Denji imagined a mom would sound like.

Aki's gaze shifted back to Denji. He looked oddly serene. "I know you can do it."

"Uh ... thanks?" Denji frowned, not sure what to make of the unexpected encouragement, when a voice called from behind them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Makima! "She's back!" Denji exclaimed, jumping to his feet. He sank down just as quickly. "Aw, Ms. Makima, you're not wearing a swimsuit!"

Makima wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and a sundress the color of the sea, the same outfit she'd had on before. The only alteration to her ensemble was the book in her hand.

"Of course not," she said. "I wasn't planning to swim. I didn't even bring a swimsuit. I just went to grab a book I could read on the beach."

"Aww ..." Denji said dejectedly.

"Greetings, humans! Feast your eyes on Power!" With that, Power leapt into view clad in a two-piece black swimsuit.

Denji stared. "A black bikini ..."

Power put her hands on her hips, puffed out her chest, and laughed proudly. "Gah ha ha ha! Do you not feel blessed to have seen me this way? You owe me gratitude for the rest of your miserable lives!"

"You dropped a boob," Denji said, listlessly pointing at Power's feet. A chest pad was lying there. As usual, she was stuffing her top.

"No! How could this happen? The humiliation!" Power clutched her uneven chest. Her wail could be heard across the sandy beach.

Later, Denji and Power rented an inflatable raft and paddled out to sea. They made their way along the cerulean surface, the little oar cutting through the wave crests.

“Gah ha ha ha!” Power cackled. “Go, Denji! Paddle! Drive us forward!” She was in even higher spirits than usual.

Sitting behind her, Denji poked unenthusiastically at the water. “Dammit! I thought I was gonna see Ms. Makima in a swimsuit!”

“Are you still griping about that?” Power complained. “I don’t even know what you see in that witch.”

“Hey, she’s—” Denji began hotly, but he found himself at a loss for words. “What *do* I see in her?” he asked himself.

“Who cares?” Power turned to him with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “Denji, I have just had a genius idea.”

“What’s that?”

“We run away. Here. Now. In this boat.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’re on the sea! And Makima is on the land!” She pointed at the beach, where Makima sat in the shade of the umbrella, focused on her book. “She’s not paying any attention to us. We can float happily along ... and just keep going until we float all the way to another country. Not even Makima can walk on water. She’ll never catch us!”

“I think she could still come after us.” Denji was not sold on the idea whatsoever.

“Don’t forget, Denji.” Power’s voice dropped. “Makima doesn’t have a swimsuit!”

“Oh ...”

“As I said, genius,” Power crowed. “Only the greatest mind in the world could conceive of such a plot. Finally, I will be free and clear!” Power jumped to her feet, seized by her own brilliance. Denji grabbed the side of the boat as it rocked back and forth.

“Hey, you’re gonna capsize us!” he said.

“Now I command you—paddle, Denji! Foreign lands lie almost at our

fingertips!”

“How far away is the next country, exactly?”

Power faltered. “Er ... I’m not sure. Five hundred meters?”

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s that close.” Even Denji had to roll his eyes in exasperation.

“Six hundred then!”

“You think? Are you sure we can do this?”

“I am surer than sure! In my whole entire life I have never told one single lie!”

“That’s a lie right there!”

Power had been a compulsive liar for as long as Denji had known her. But other things had changed. When they’d first become partners, Denji had been convinced they’d never get along. Living together, though, had brought them into a strange kind of harmony.

He lay on his back, listening to the waves lap at the edge of the boat. “I don’t think there’s any running away from this. Besides, I’m pretty happy right now.”

Power looked down at him.

“What?” said Denji. “Power, what are you—urk!” Power abruptly plopped down on Denji’s stomach and pinched his cheeks. “The hell? That hurts!”

“Dummy! Stupid dumb dummy! Moron and fool! You give up at the drop of a hat!”

Denji winced. “Easy for you to say ...”

“If you don’t have the guts, I’ll run away by myself! I’ll go to foreign lands without you!”

“Um, Power ...”

“Stay here and pine after Makima’s nonexistent bathing suit! I wouldn’t take you now if you begged me!”

“Power, you’re talking crazy.”

“But Denji, if one day you should discover my absence is tearing you up

inside, then come and find me. I promise I shall be waiting for you!”

Denji lay there for a moment with Power gripping his cheeks. He nodded. “Yeah, okay. I hear you.” The breeze gliding across the ocean kissed his damp skin.

Power smiled gently, then pressed her forehead to his. “Worry not, Denji. I know you can do it, if anyone can. For are you not my partner?”

“Power?”

There it was again. The feeling of wrongness. The nagging sense that he was forgetting something important. He’d felt it at the shrine, and again when he’d been talking to Aki. What was it? Every time he tried to focus, it slipped away. Even now, it was drifting out of his grasp ...

“You, escape? In this flimsy rubber boat?” Aki snorted. “I’d like to see you try.” He’d swum up alongside the raft without either of them noticing.

“You guys ...” said Denji, but they didn’t hear him. Power was too busy splashing Aki.

“A pursuer, just as I warned! I shall drive him off!”

“Hey! Arrgh! Stop that!” Aki screwed up his face against the point-blank barrage.

“Gah ha ha ha! Look at Topknot cry! Victory is mine!”

“I’m not crying, you jerk! You got seawater in my eyes!” Aki rubbed his face furiously. As Denji watched, an image drifted into his head—Aki weeping at the hospital over his partner Himeno’s death. That moment had made Denji realize he had no desire to cry himself. He’d started to worry that he’d lost more than his physical heart when he merged with Pochita—maybe something of his humanity was gone too.

He let his gaze settle on Power, who was still flinging water at Aki as fast as she could. What about now? If Power died, would Denji cry? *Could* he cry? He looked at Aki, who was resisting Power as best he could. If Aki died, would he cry then?

Finally he sat up in the raft and looked back at the shore. Makima was still

sitting under the umbrella with her book. She glanced up and gave a little wave. If Makima died, would he—

“Yargh!” Denji exclaimed as seawater doused him from overhead. He wiped his face. Power and Aki were both grinning at him.

“There are no neutral parties in this battle, Denji!” cried Power. “You must join in!”

“You think you’re safe lying there?” Aki added.

“You stinking ... !” Denji flung himself out of the boat and joined the water fight. The strange dissonance he felt about their behavior, his thoughts about whether he would cry if any of them died—those things still bothered him, but who wanted to think about dark things on a sunny vacation? That was no fun.

Their shouts carried through the summer air. Along with the crashing of the waves, they drowned out Denji’s doubts.

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“Denji. You’re crying.”

“Am not.” Denji rubbed at his eyes. Why would Makima say that?

They were back at the hotel. After a short rest, the group had decided to play Old Maid. Denji was down to a single card. It bore the word *Joker* and a picture of a leering clown.

“Crap, not again! Why me?” Denji’s shoulders slumped as he tossed the card down. He’d racked up nine straight losses. He was pretty sure he hadn’t been crying, but with a record like that, who could blame him?

“You really suck at this, don’t you, Denji?” Aki said.

“Gah ha ha! Reading you is like reading a very easy-to-read book!” said Power.

“Aw, cram it!”

He didn’t know which was worse—Aki’s pity or Power’s gloating. At least Makima didn’t join in. Instead she looked at the clock on the wall. “I think it’s

about time we wrapped this up.”

“What?” said Denji. “No way! We can’t stop when I’m the only one who hasn’t won a game! One more go! Please, Ms. Makima?”

“But it’s almost time.”

Time? Time for what? Denji clutched his hands together, imploring. “I’m begging you, just one more round! We can do that, can’t we?” He hadn’t expected to care about cards when they’d dealt the first hand, but now he couldn’t bear to walk away with Aki and Power mocking him. Small, troubling thoughts had worried him throughout the day, but at that moment the only thing that bothered him was his 0-9 record.

“All right,” Makima said at last. “One more game.”

“Hell yes!” Denji said. A final chance to redeem himself.

Minutes later ...

“And I’m out!” Makima declared.

“You’re out already?” Denji sighed. “I can’t believe you’re so good at this, Ms. Makima.”

“For your information, I’ve never lost a game of Old Maid,” she replied. Denji wasn’t sure whether she was being serious, but after playing her, he could believe it.

Denji was slow to pick up on games, but he was starting to see how Old Maid worked. You had to avoid drawing the joker yourself while forcing one of your opponents to pick it up. For that, you had to be able to read them. But Makima didn’t have a tell. Her expression never flickered. He couldn’t deny that she deserved her victories. Still, the battle was just beginning. With Makima out, the struggle among the members of the Hayakawa household continued. The number of cards in their hands shrank steadily.

“Your turn to draw, Denji,” Aki said. He held up his two cards. Denji gulped, then moved to take the card on his right. There was no reaction from Aki. Aki wasn’t as unflappable as Makima, but he knew how to keep a poker face—or, more precisely, an Old Maid face. Denji had a feeling that Aki was holding the

joker, but he couldn't tell if it was the card on the left or the right. He began to reach for the card on the left when he thought he saw Aki's eyebrow rise. It was only the slightest movement, but to Denji it looked like concealed panic.

"Heh heh heh! Oh, Aki, you finally let your guard slip," Denji chuckled, his hand still on the card. He saw Aki's expression grow even darker.

"Wait, Denji!" Power said.

"I'm not waiting for anything!" Denji tore the card from Aki's hand. "Finally! I win!" he crowed, his face glowing. He turned the card toward him ...

... and saw the joker grinning back.

"Huh?" He was as shocked as he was dismayed. His shoulders slumped again.

Aki put a hand to his mouth, trying to keep from laughing. "You *do* suck at this, Denji."

"You ... You *tricked* me!" Denji accused.

"That's how the game is played," Aki shrugged. "It's your fault for taking the bait."

"Dammit!" Denji swore. "This isn't over. I haven't lost yet!"

Aki put down his last card, leaving Power and Denji to battle it out in single combat. Denji had two cards, including the joker. Power was down to her last one. If she left him with the joker, he'd be the loser yet again.

"Gah ha ha! Surrender, Denji! This victory is as good as mine. You have no hope, considering that I once won the Old Maid world championship!"

"You did not! Get over yourself! I'm not losing this time!"

Power made a show of waving goodbye to him, a crude attempt to get his goat. Power was much easier to read than Makima or Aki. She was closer to Denji's level of skill at the game. Denji was convinced that her superior record came down to nothing more than dumb luck. Which was exactly why he refused to let her win again.

"What are you playing at, Denji?" Power asked.

"Hey, if I'm so easy to read, go ahead and read me!" He shut his eyes tight.

Denji knew that if Power reached for the joker, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from smiling—and if she was about to leave him with the old maid, he wouldn't be able to stop his face from falling. That was how they'd all led him by the nose through game after game. With his eyes shut, he couldn't see the cards, which meant he couldn't react. A foolproof strategy.

Maybe I'm smarter than I thought! Denji told himself.

There was a long, silent moment. At last he felt Power take a card. He cracked an eye open, cautious but eager to get a look at the last card in his hand.

It was the joker.

"How the hell?" He flung the card down on the tatami flooring. "Dammit! I really thought this was going to be my game!"

"I know what happened, Denji. Want me to tell you?" Makima had seated herself on a chair on the balcony and was watching with amusement.

"Yes!" Denji said eagerly. "What was it? It was dumb luck, right?"

"Power snuck around behind you and peeked at your cards."

"What?"

"Gah ha ha!" gloated Power, ecstatically. "'Twas the easiest victory of my life!"

Denji watched with bewilderment as his partner cheered for herself. "Hey ... isn't that cheating?"

Power continued grinning. "By no means! You left yourself open by closing your eyes."

"Hard to argue with that," Makima said.

"Yeah, I think she's got you there," Aki added.

Their agreement only made Power giddier. "Gah ha ha ha! You lose again, Denji. That's ten times in a row!"

For a long moment Denji looked at the joker in his hand—and then he stuffed it in his mouth.

"Hey! He ate it!" Aki exclaimed.

“Oh no! Spit it out! Out with it!”

“Mrrrgghhh!”

Denji ran around the room, evading Aki and Power long enough to swallow the card. By the time they managed to grab him, he simply stuck out his tongue. “Now you see it, now you don’t! With no Old Maid, there’s no loss!”

Aki and Power looked at each other. They both shrugged. “I never do know what you’ll do next, Denji,” Aki said.

“You remain an idiot, however,” Power added.

“Oh.” Denji had expected more of an argument. The lack of a reaction took the wind out of his sails.

The other two let go of his arms. “With that tenacity,” said Aki, “maybe you have a chance at beating Ms. Makima next time.”

“Gah ha ha! We’re expecting big things from you, Denji!” Power taunted.

Denji ignored them. Once again he felt that little tug.

Makima clapped her hands, interrupting his train of thought. “Okay, that’s it for cards. It’s time. Why don’t we get going?”

Brought back to the moment, Denji looked outside. It was dark. “What do you mean? It’s night already. Where are we going?”

“Out.”

“Out?” Denji repeated dumbly.

“Remember?” Makima prodded. “I promised you’d like what happens after we relax at the hotel.”

Makima led the Hayakawa household outside. As they got closer to the beach, the scent of saltwater filled the air. In the moonlight, Enoshima seemed to melt into the darkness of the sea. The black silhouette cut the dark blue sky like a gate to the netherworld.

“What’s going on, Ms. Makima?” Denji asked. Makima held a finger to her lips and pointed at the sky.

A second later, there was a *fwewwwwww* as something shot to the heavens. It

exploded with a boom. The sky filled with a shower of light, a gigantic flower, which faded along with the sound. The colors lit the island and danced across Makima's face as she turned and said, "There's a fireworks display tonight, Denji."

"Oh!" A light went off in Denji's head. "So that's why you prayed for clear weather!"

"And it seems my prayers were heard. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Uh ... yeah." Denji didn't know exactly what he'd been expecting, but he couldn't shake a sense of disappointment. The fireworks were pretty all right, but they didn't fill his belly or get his blood pumping. He wasn't bored, but he wasn't exactly excited either. Personally, he would have preferred to get some dinner or take a bath. Aki and Power, on the other hand, seemed transfixed by the show. Denji stood beside Makima, and each time the fireworks went off, their light gave him a glimpse of the beauty of her face.

Eh. It's all right, I guess. Denji folded his arms and watched the quintessential summer spectacle. Some of the fireworks looked like chrysanthemums or peonies from brocade fabric. Others scattered glittering petals in every direction. Then there were the novelty ones that made star shapes or silly faces. Finally, there was one that traced a great golden arc across the sky like a comet. Each lit up the sky for just an instant before fading away.

Huh? What's going on here? Watching the display overhead, Denji was overtaken once more by the sense that something was off. As each burst of light faded, he was hit by a wave of loneliness and unease. When the fireworks had started, he'd waited impatiently for them to be over, but now he ached with the wish that they could never end.

"Ms. Makima?" he said, but when he turned she wasn't there. He spun around to see Aki and Power slipping away. "Hey! Where do you think you're going?" he shouted, but they didn't turn back.

He tried to follow them, but his body felt like lead. The thick air twisted itself around his limbs, fighting his every step. "Hey, wait! Wait already!" It was like trying to swim through mud. With every step, he lost ground.

A firework exploded.

I remember.

“Aki! Power! Don’t go! Come back!” He thrust out his right leg, but it sank into the asphalt.

The other two were halfway across the bridge now. Sparks drifted down from above.

Oh yeah ...

“Shit! I don’t get it ...” Denji said.

Fweeeee! Another firework climbed into the sky, carving a path of white light through the pitch black. This was going to be a big one. He could tell somehow that it was the finale, the end.

The two of them ...

“Come back! Come back! Come baaaaack!” Denji reached out as if he could pluck them from the night. They were almost gone.

Abruptly, the ground released his feet. He tumbled forward.

The two of them are already ...

“Dammit! No, it can’t end!” He clenched his fists, he gritted his teeth, he glared daggers at the sky.

The last firework detonated. It felt as if it was going off in his gut; the sound threatened to tear the night apart. The biggest flower of all bloomed directly overhead, obliterating the darkness with a blinding light.

“This can’t be the end! It can’t be over! *This can’t be it!*” He was shouting at the top of his lungs, his face crumpling. He tried to out-howl the explosion, but his voice was barely a whisper against the thunder in the sky as the flower shed its petals into the Enoshima night, then dwindled back to darkness.

In the last glow before it faded, Denji had a sense that Aki and Power turned to look at him from the far side of the bridge. But that was all it was. Just a sense.

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“Hey, wake up already.”

“Hrm? Hrngh?” Denji opened his eyes to someone shaking him roughly. An acrid scent prickled his nose. As his vision focused, he found himself looking at a clean-shaven man with streaks of white in his hair and a scar by his mouth. Kishibe, captain of Public Safety Devil Extermination Special Division 4.

Denji let out a long breath. He was in a small, dim room with barren walls of exposed concrete. The floor was littered with junk food and wrappers. Kobeni, his former colleague in Public Safety, was lying on the floor nearby.

Kishibe gave Denji an appraising look. “You shouted in your sleep. Are you okay?”

“I shouted?” Denji asked, still groggy.

“Keep your voice down,” Kishibe cautioned. “Or Makima will hear us.”

“Right ...” It was coming back to him. Kishibe had brought them to this safe house to escape Makima. Makima, who wanted Chainsaw Man. That was why she’d given Denji the life he’d longed for—and then snatched it away.

“How’re you feeling, Denji?” Kishibe asked.

Denji came up with a response. “Not great but, like, not awful.”

Discovering that his experiences in Public Safety, the new life he thought he’d made, had all been engineered to serve Makima’s ends made him feel like he’d been flushed down the world’s filthiest toilet. But all his life, he’d had a talent for making the crap in his life go away with a good night’s sleep.

Kishibe asked another question. “If you don’t feel awful, why are you crying?”

“Huh?” Reflexively, Denji touched his face. His fingertips found something damp on his cheeks. It was cold to the touch—but in his chest was an unexpected warmth. “I dunno,” he said. “I think I was dreaming or something.”

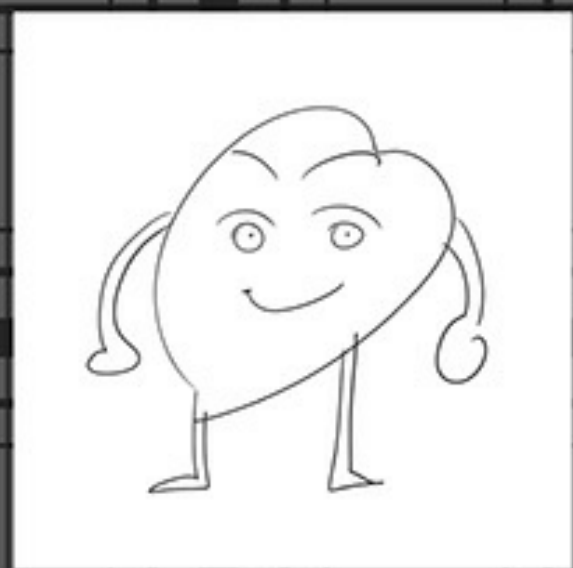
“You can do that at a time like this?” Kishibe raised an eyebrow.

“If anyone can do it, I can. That’s what she said.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I ... I’m not sure.” Denji tilted his head, puzzled. Slowly, he climbed to his

feet. He touched his chest to make sure his heart was beating, then flashed Kishibe a peace sign. “Okay. Gonna go kill Makima. I’ll be right back.”



Tatsuki Fujimoto

These stories are
packed with my dreams!

Tatsuki Fujimoto won Honorable Mention in the November 2013 Shueisha Crown Newcomers' Awards for his debut one-shot story "Love is Blind". His first series, *Fire Punch*, ran for eight volumes. His breakout hit, *Chainsaw Man*, began serialization in 2018 in *Weekly Shonen Jump*. The critically acclaimed *Look Back* and *Goodbye, Eri* were published in 2021 and 2022 respectively.



Sakaku Hishikawa

It's awesome to be involved with even a small part of the world of a fantastic manga like *Chainsaw Man*. Thank you so much to Fujimoto Sensei and all our readers. I hope a beautiful future awaits all of you.

Sakaku Hishikawa wrote their first light novel, *Gamble Witch Kingdom*, in 2016. Since then they have written *Jigokuraku: Utakata no Yume* in 2019 and, most recently, *Chainsaw Man: Buddy Stories* in 2021.

